MARVEL

ULTIMATE INVASION

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- AIPT

"Set[s] the stage for something utterly fantastic."
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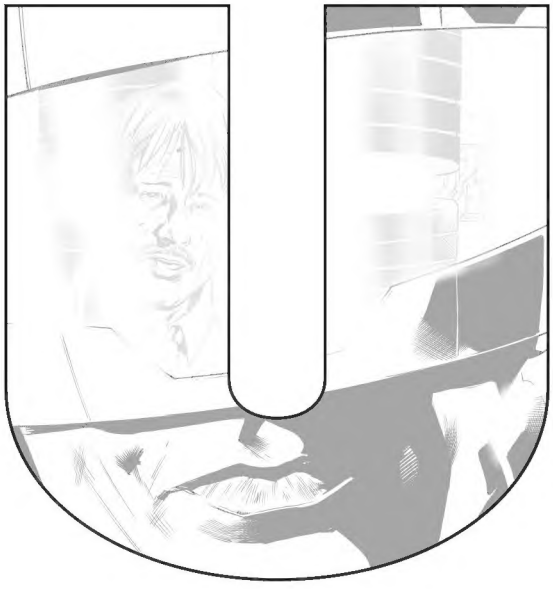
HICKMAN
HITCH
CURRIE
SINCLAIR



ULTIMATE INVASION

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SPECIAL THANKS TO DONNY CATES

ULTIMATE INVASION

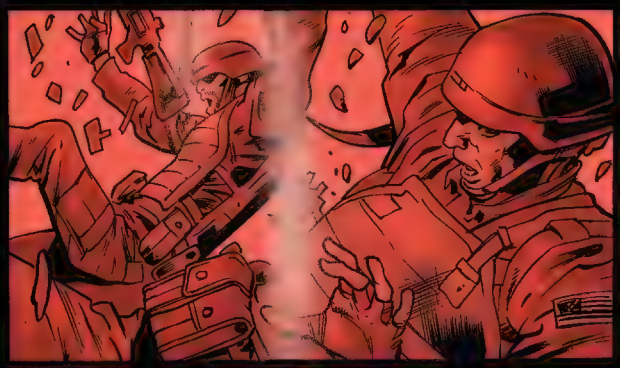
CHAPTER ONE: "GOOD ARTISTS COPY"

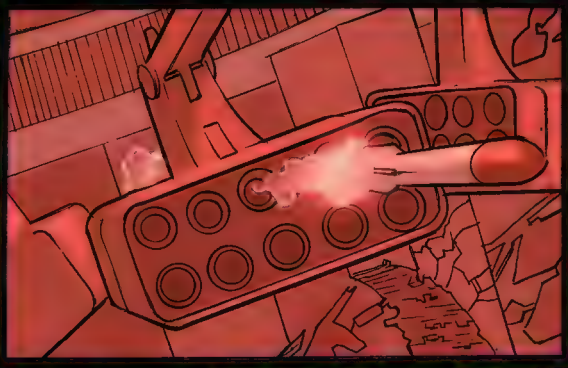
TWO MONTHS AGO.
Water Tower Place
THE BLAAKGUARD BUILDING.
WE'RE HERE.

ONE MINUTE.
POINT OF ENTRY?
WE'RE GOING THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR?
SEE THE WINDOW BESIDE YOU? IF YOU LOOK OUT, YOU'LL SEE A BIG BUILDING. GO AHEAD AND DRAW A STRAIGHT LINE 'TWEEN HERE AND THERE.
UH-HUH. WE'RE GONNA WALK RIGHT IN.
...
HOW MANY GUARDS?
A LOT. ALONG WITH AN AUTOMATED FIRING PLATFORM AND A SECURITY SYSTEM THAT CAN'T BE EXTERNALLY HACKED OR DISABLED.
BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT YOU SHOULD BE WORRIED ABOUT.
OKAY. WHAT IS?
SAME AS ALWAYS. GETTIN' OUT WITH WHAT WE CAME FOR.
IT'S TIME.

OH #$%&.

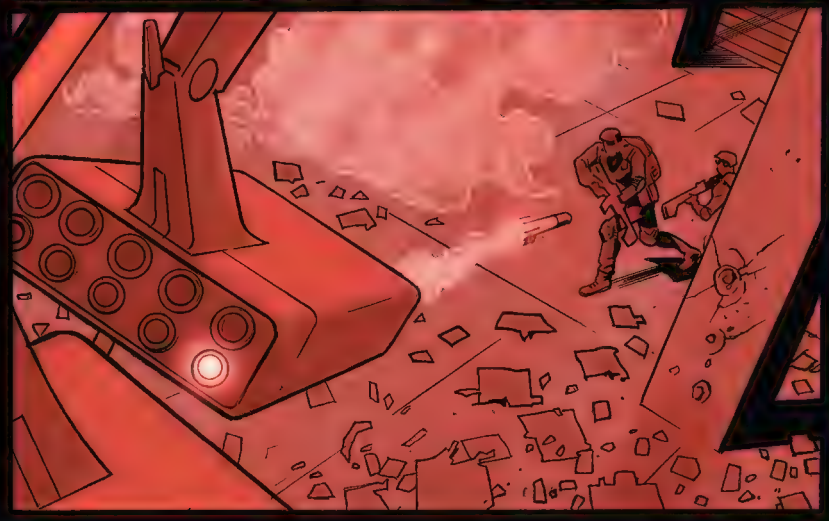
HOW AM I NOT DEAD? I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M NOT--
IT'S NOT LUCK, IDIOT, IT'S THE SUIT. NOW FOCUS ON THE JOB!

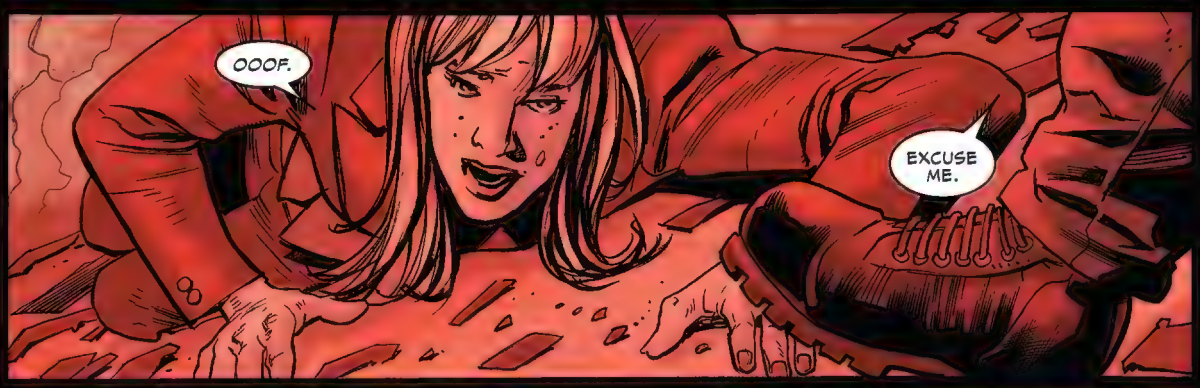




... FELT THAT ONE.

WE'VE GOT TO TAKE THAT THING OUT.
TELL YOU WHAT, YOU FIND THE MANAGER AND LODGE A COMPLAINT...
...AND I'LL TRY SOMETHING A LITTLE MORE DIRECT.




OOOF.
EXCUSE ME.

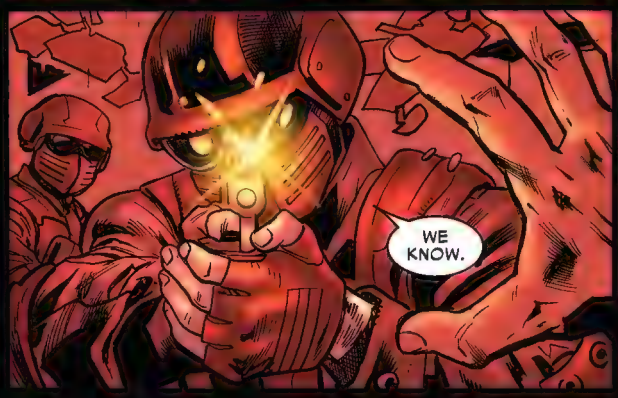
ARE YOU THE MANAGER?
I'M NOT THE MANAGER.
YEAH, BUT YOU DO HAVE A KEY, DON'T YOU? I'LL TAKE THAT NOW.

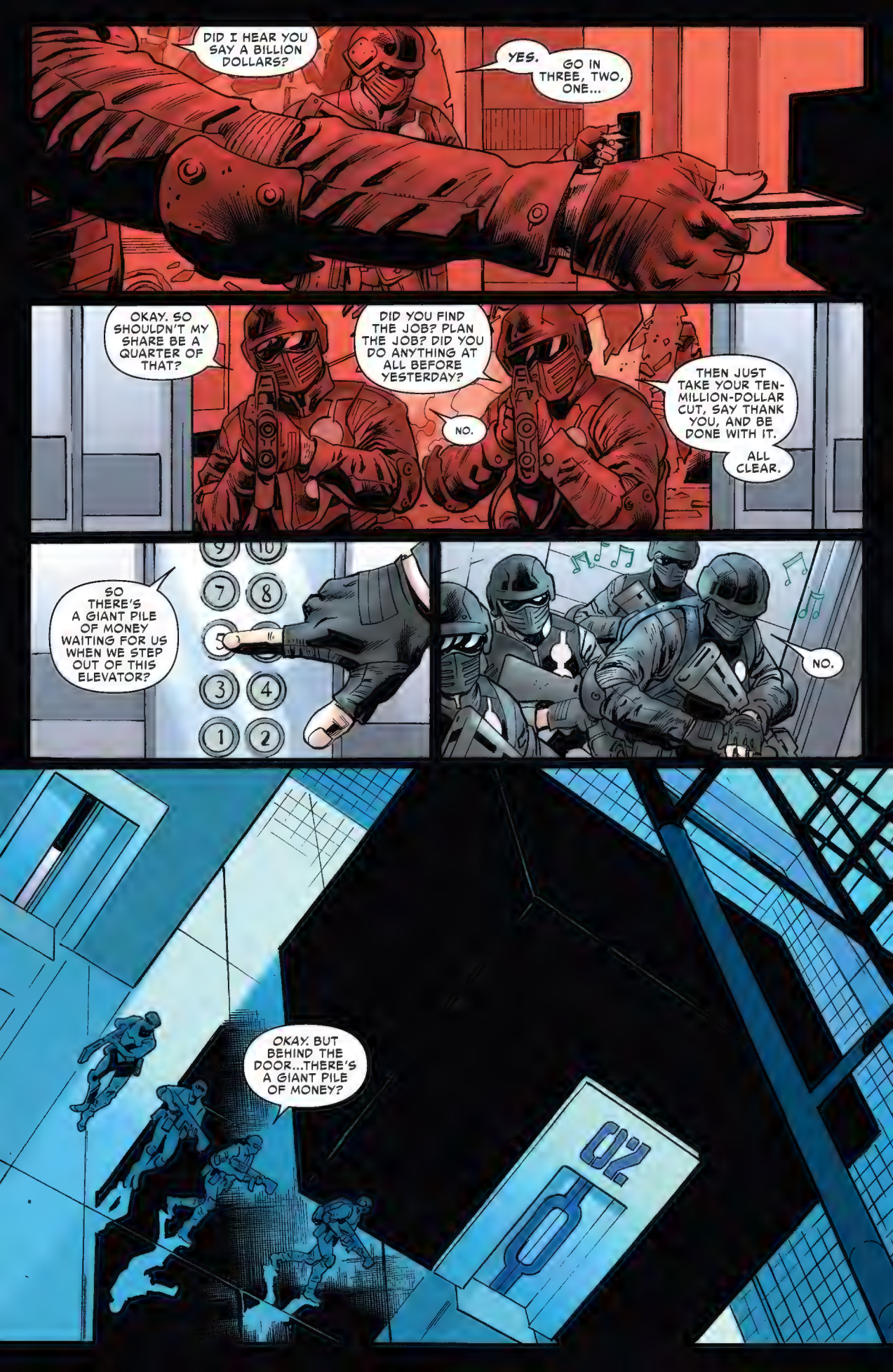
GOT THE FIRST ONE!
YOU TOO.

WHAT...WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?
WHAT DO YOU WANT?

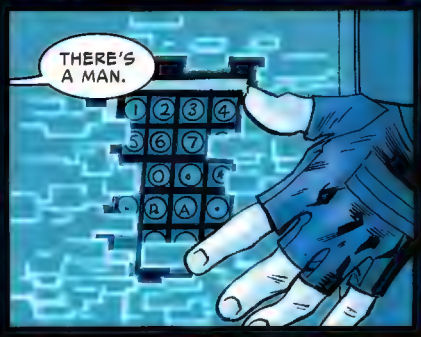
A BILLION DOLLARS.

THIS... THIS ISN'T A BANK.

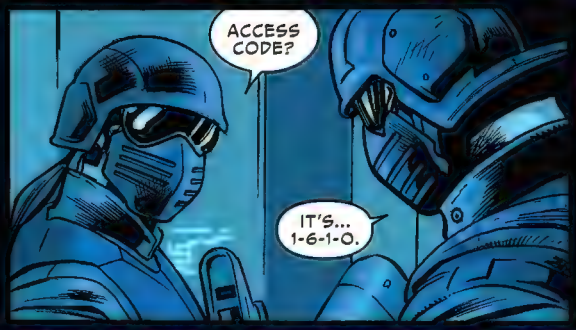

WE KNOW.


DID I HEAR YOU SAY A BILLION DOLLARS?
YES.
GO IN THREE, TWO, ONE...
OKAY. SO SHOULDN'T MY SHARE BE A QUARTER OF THAT?
DID YOU FIND THE JOB? PLAN THE JOB? DID YOU DO ANYTHING AT ALL BEFORE YESTERDAY?
NO.
THEN JUST TAKE YOUR TEN-MILLION-DOLLAR CUT, SAY THANK YOU, AND BE DONE WITH IT.
ALL CLEAR.
SO THERE'S A GIANT PILE OF MONEY WAITING FOR US WHEN WE STEP OUT OF THIS ELEVATOR?
NO.
OKAY. BUT BEHIND THE DOOR...THERE'S A GIANT PILE OF MONEY?
20

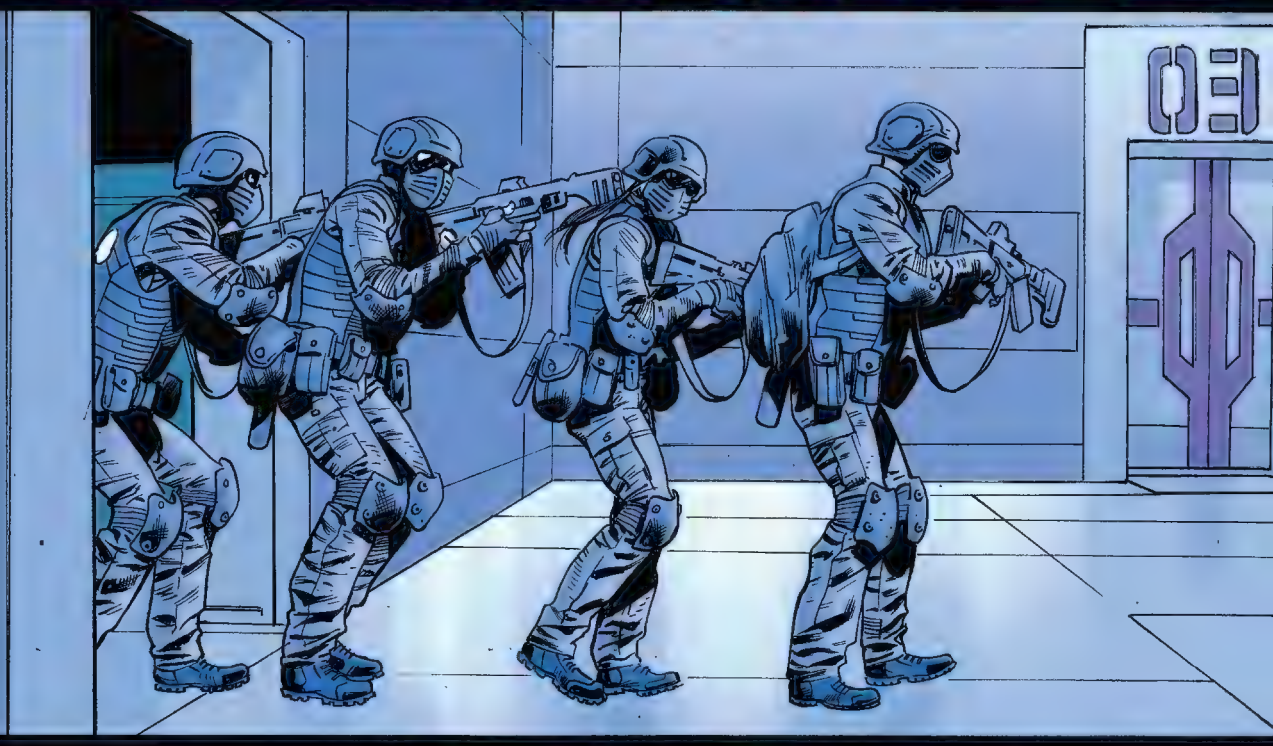
NO.


THERE'S A MAN.

WHAT?
A MAN...
...WHO HAPPENED TO PROMISE US A GIANT PILE OF MONEY IF WE GOT HIM OUT OF HERE.


ACCESS CODE?
IT'S... 1-6-1-0.

IT'S GREEN. WE'RE GOOD TO GO.
LET'S GET PAID, PEOPLE.



Right on time.

Did you bring what I asked?
YEAH.
...
Fantastic.

HERE YOU GO, SIR.
WE BROUGHT A CHANGE OF CLOTHES TOO.
First things first.
AGREED.
WHERE'S OUR MONEY?
Where all money is...floating in the ether. Awaiting summons from an imaginary state to a more believable fiction.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE YOU DON'T HAVE IT.
I promise you. Whatever "it" is...I most certainly do have it.
AM I REALLY SUPPOSED TO BELIEVE THIS GUY DID ALL THIS FROM INSIDE OF A PRISON...
...BUT HE COULDN'T GET HIMSELF OUT?

The trick is not escaping, it's escaping without anyone knowing you've gone.
My captors--*benevolent souls that they are*--deemed it necessary for me to receive the required ***care*** a civilized society demands for those touched by the world in a particular way.
But they also knew that I was, *well*, so very me. So precautions had to be taken.
And thus, instead of one therapist--*I saw a rotating team of them*. It took an eternity--*a full 37 sessions*--for me to mentally break and reprogram them. So as to send them back into the world full of purpose.
I begat them, they begat you, and now you are here before me.
Take off your masks, please.
WHY WOULD WE DO THAT?
JUST DO IT.
Each of you were recruited for the job. I chose you after my flock carefully examined each of your profiles and geneti--
Who are you?
I'M JACKSON.

Dominic Green. Mischa Slope. Randall West.
But you are Jackson and not Keith Conrad.
KEITH GOT ITCHY AND SNUCK OUT OF THE SAFE HOUSE TWO DAYS AGO. HE DIED IN A CAR WRECK ABOUT AN HOUR AFTER THAT. FREAK ACCIDENT. WE HAD TO IMPROVISE.
Ah. The unforeseen complications of impatience and ennui. Trapped here, I'd forgotten what *most people* call discipline.
I, of course, planned for overlap, but the genetic sequencing was for you four for a reason. Each and every ingredient is what makes for good soup.
This will present as a less than one-percent anomaly. Most people would miss it...
...but I wouldn't. And *he* certainly won't.
Which ***vexes*** me. *To no end.* I suppose my choice now is a subtle prayer or a more "on brand" message.
IT WAS LAST MINUTE. THIS WAS THE BEST I COULD DO.
Your best?
There was one of my therapists in here who--*before I did what had to be done*--did have a surprising effect on me...
He encouraged and challenged me in a way I did not believe was possible.
His ideas of acceptable goals and personal betterment were predictably short-sighted, but he actually did make me want to be a better man--a ***better man*** with ***better goals.***

So I'm trying to be *better*...
I really am.
7.

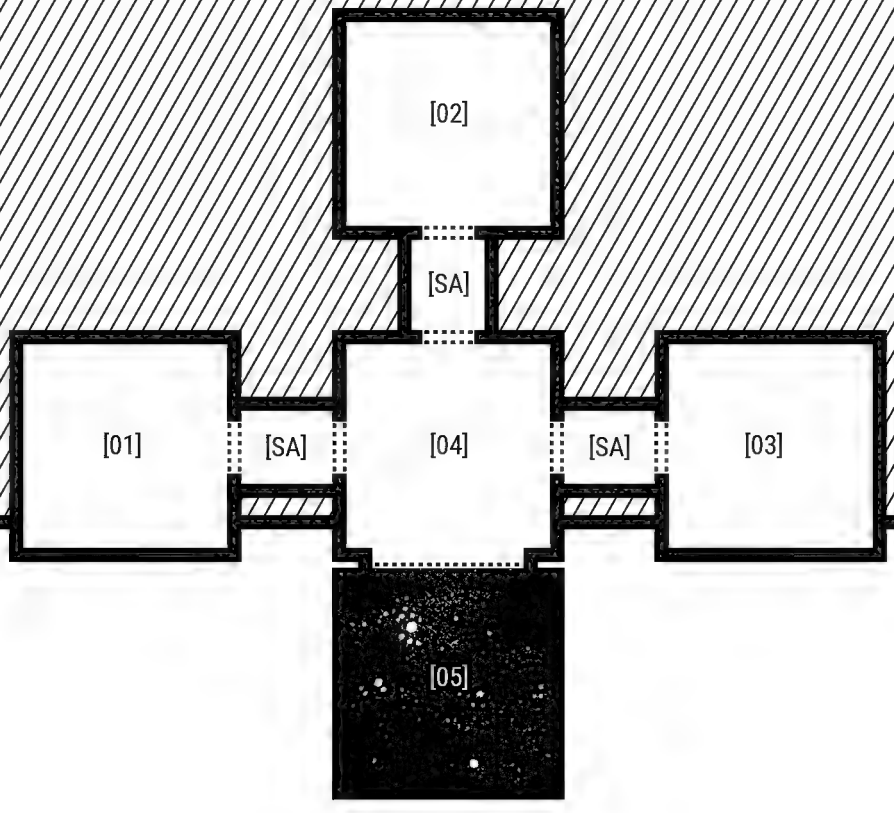
MARVEL COMICS PRESENTS...

ULTIMATE
INVASION

DAMAGE CONTROL

REMOTE PRISON [PR_42] **QUARANTINE**

PRISONER MANIFEST: 1610



[SA].....SECURE ACCESS
[01].....PROJECT PEGASUS.....[*restricted*]
[02].....BLAAKGUARD.....[*destroyed*]
[03].....FURY ACCESS.....[*classified*]
[04].....**PRISONER CELL [1610]**
[05].....NEGATIVE ZONE

THE MAKER [1610]

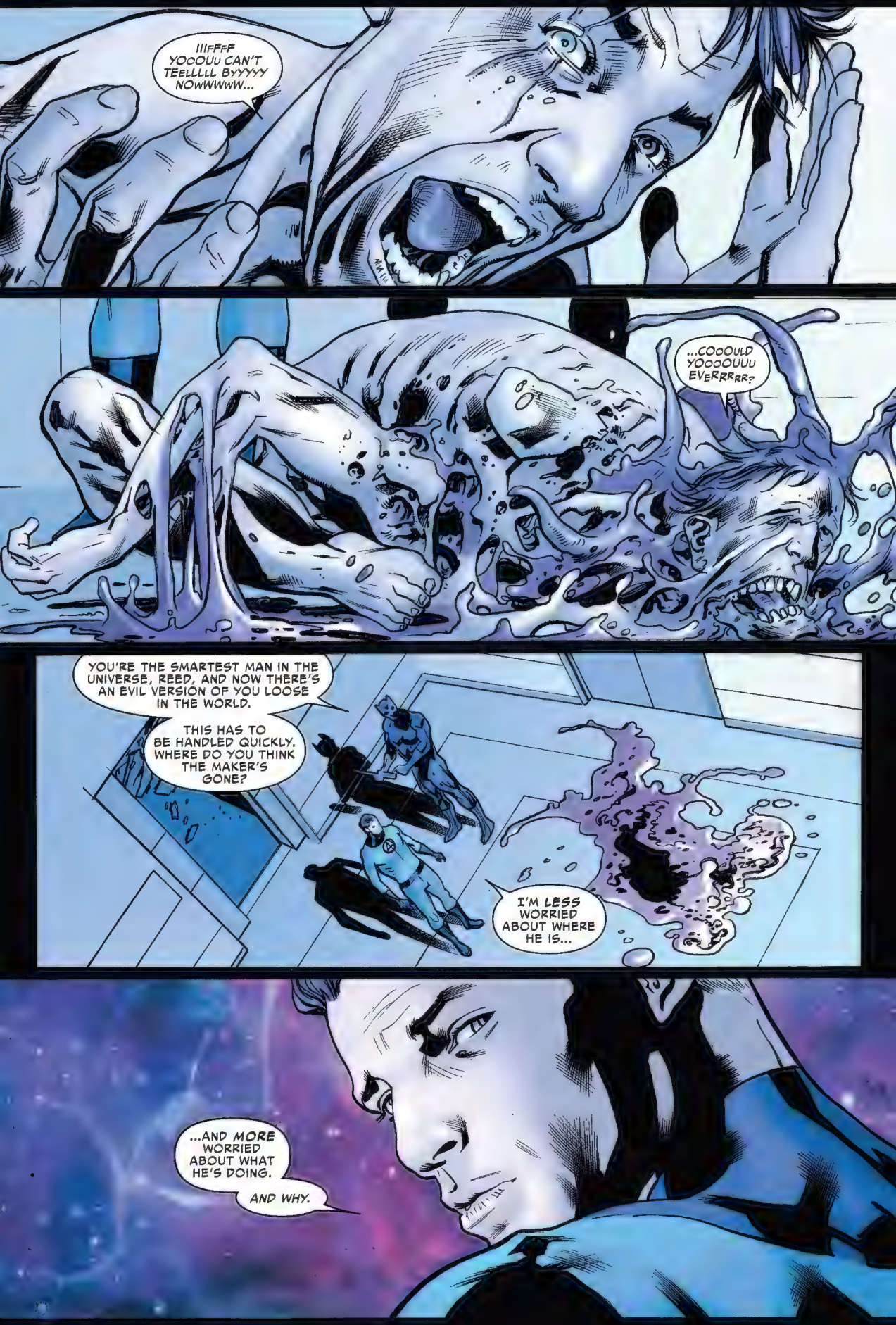
MULTIVERSAL REED RICHARDS [DIVERGENT]

DANGER:
Prisoner possesses universal-level intellect combined with megalomania and personal dissociative disorder. Level one restrictions are in place, and extreme caution is advised.

SIX WEEKS AGO.
THE BLAAKGUARD BUILDING.
ALL AROUND US, OUR CITIES ARE CRUMBLING.
I KNOW THAT MANY MIGHT CONSIDER SOMETHING LIKE THIS THE APOTHEOSIS OF MODERNITY'S BLIGHT, BUT I WOULD NOT COUNT MYSELF AMONG THAT NUMBER.
NOR YOU, REED, SO WHY ARE WE LOOKING AT RUBBLE?

"IT'S BEST WHEN BEGINNING THESE THINGS TO REMEMBER HOW MUCH HARDER IT IS TO BUILD A THING THAN DESTROY A THING."
WHEN I SAW THE FOOTAGE--WATCHED THE EXPLOSION AND THE BUILDING GO DOWN--I COULDN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT IT. LIKE MY MIND WAS TRYING TO SOLVE A PUZZLE THAT DIDN'T PRESENT AS ONE. SO I TRIED TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK--BUT WASN'T ALLOWED TO.
AH.
AND THEN--LIKE MANNA FROM HEAVEN--MY GOOD FRIEND WITH YEARS OF GOVERNMENT INFLUENCE AND CONNECTIONS CAME FOR A VISIT. AND I JUST HAD TO SHOW HIM THE SIGHTS.
YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW THICK THE RED TAPE IS ON THIS ONE.
FROM WHICH WE CAN INFER THAT SOMETHING WAS HIDDEN HERE... AND NO ONE WANTS TO TALK ABOUT IT.
ONE QUESTION: WHY ARE WE BOTH PRETENDING THAT YOU COULDN'T FIND A WAY TO TAKE A LOOK IF YOU WANTED TO?
I WAS RECENTLY IN SOMETHING OF A RULE-FOLLOWING PHASE, T'CHALLA. I AM TRYING TO SHOW SOME RESTRAINT.
HOW'S THAT WORKING OUT FOR YOU?
NOT WELL.

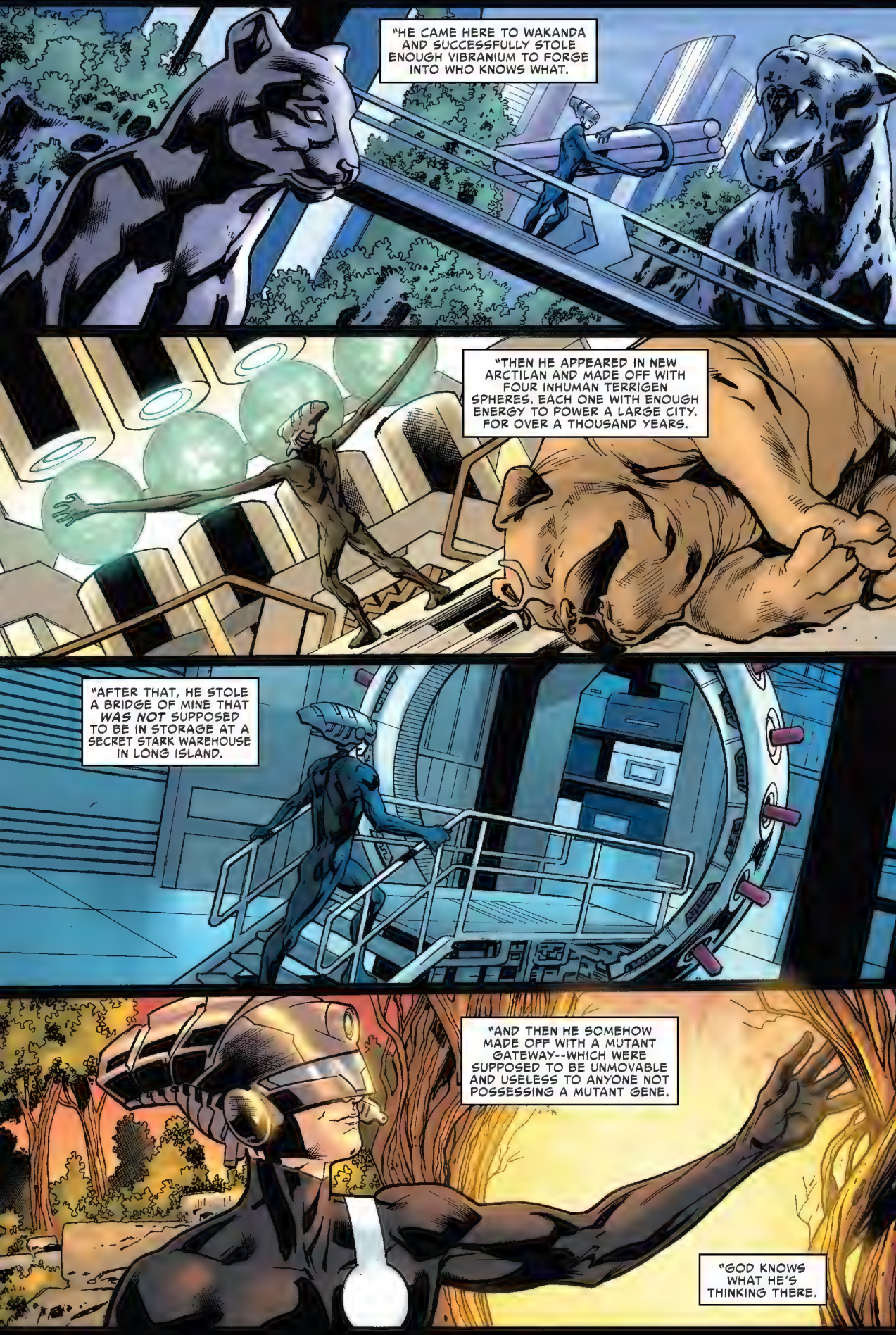
THIS IS WHY YOU HAD TROUBLE GETTING ACCESS.
YOU SEE, THE GOVERNMENT ISN'T COVERING FOR ANYONE--THEY'RE DIRECTLY INVOLVED.
MY CONTACTS SAY THIS BUILDING WAS HIDING A SECRET DAMAGE CONTROL NODE.
DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT--OR WHO--THEY COULD HAVE HAD HIDDEN HERE?
DAMAGE CONTROL.
OH MY GOD...
LATER.
YOU CAN BREATHE NOW.
HE'S STILL HERE.
HMMM. PERHAPS...
IS THAT REALLY YOU, REED? ARE YOU REALLY ME?


IIIFFFF YOOOUU CAN'T TEELLLLL BYYYYY NOWWWWW...
...COOOULD YOOOOUUU EVERRRRR?
YOU'RE THE SMARTEST MAN IN THE UNIVERSE, REED, AND NOW THERE'S AN EVIL VERSION OF YOU LOOSE IN THE WORLD.
THIS HAS TO BE HANDLED QUICKLY. WHERE DO YOU THINK THE MAKER'S GONE?
I'M LESS WORRIED ABOUT WHERE HE IS...
...AND MORE WORRIED ABOUT WHAT HE'S DOING.
AND WHY.

ONE WEEK LATER.
THE BAXTER BUILDING.
...
DAD?
DAD?

There you are.
I knew you had it in you.
"SO WHAT DID HE TAKE?"

THE NEXT DAY. THE NECROPOLIS.
I'M NOT SURE. HE CLOSED THE LOOP--COVERED HIS TRACKS WELL.
WHAT WE DO KNOW IS WHERE HE WENT AFTER THAT...
...DON'T WE?


"HE CAME HERE TO WAKANDA AND SUCCESSFULLY STOLE ENOUGH VIBRANIUM TO FORGE INTO WHO KNOWS WHAT.
"THEN HE APPEARED IN NEW ARCTILAN AND MADE OFF WITH FOUR INHUMAN TERRIGEN SPHERES. EACH ONE WITH ENOUGH ENERGY TO POWER A LARGE CITY. FOR OVER A THOUSAND YEARS.
"AFTER THAT, HE STOLE A BRIDGE OF MINE THAT *WAS NOT* SUPPOSED TO BE IN STORAGE AT A SECRET STARK WAREHOUSE IN LONG ISLAND.
"AND THEN HE SOMEHOW MADE OFF WITH A MUTANT GATEWAY--WHICH WERE SUPPOSED TO BE UNMOVABLE AND USELESS TO ANYONE NOT POSSESSING A MUTANT GENE.
"GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S THINKING THERE.

"HE THEN ABSCONDED WITH AN IMMUNITY LANCE HE FOUND IN THE SANCTUM SANCTORUM.
"AND FINALLY, IN THE RUINS OF ATLANTIS, HE SECURED ONE OF THEIR FEW FUNCTIONING DILUTION SHIELDS. APPARENTLY, AT NO SMALL COST.
"THE 'WHY' OF WHY WE ARE GATHERED HERE TODAY IS THE LINGERING QUESTION: *WHAT IS THE MAKER MAKING?*"
GIVEN ENOUGH TIME, I'M SURE WE COULD MAKE SOME ASSUMPTIONS OF WHAT HE'S BUILDING BASED ON THE RESOURCES GATHERED...
BUT THE TWO GATEWAYS, BOTH THE SPEAR AND THE SHIELD...*WHY THE REDUNDANCIES?*
IT'S A MESSAGE. TO THE INEVITABLE GATHERING OF THE GROUP OF US. SOME KIND OF UNMISTAKABLE GRAND GESTURE...TALKING SLOWLY FOR THE CHILDREN...
HE WANTS US TO KNOW.
YES. AND THE COMPONENTS HE STOLE ARE UNIQUE AND IDENTIFIABLE. HE HAS TO KNOW THAT WE'LL BE LOOKING FOR THOSE ENERGY SIGNATURES...AND HE HAS TO KNOW THAT WE'LL KNOW WHEN HE TURNS IT ON.
SO WHAT'S HE WAITING FOR?

LATER THAT SAME DAY. BROOKLYN.
How can you possibly sleep with the world moving as it is--the gears of this fraudulent, infernal machine grinding our bones to dust?
WHAT THE--?!
WHO ARE YOU?

Have we not met? I cannot tell with so many of you...
The masks and monikers and--more than that--the repetitive nature of so many of you...heroes.
WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?
You are Miles Morales, and I...
...am your brother.
...
WHAT?
I read about it in his records. It was some trick of universal rebirth and reality-shaping, as I understand it... But according to the secret history...
...it's something every creature on this planet--in this universe--shares.
But you and I have something that sets us apart from them. Apart from their shared history.
We are the only two survivors of a dead universe, Miles. The only living children of gods erased from history.
Did you know that?

DID YOU NOT?
No, not in the way I do now. But if you know, then you must feel the same itch that I do. The one you cannot reach, the one you cannot scratch...
The pull of nothingness and oblivion that we share with the world we are from--*the feeling of lives erased and forgotten.*
...
WHY ARE YOU HERE?
I am going... *home.*
Would you like to come with me?
OH MAN...
YOU'RE TOTALLY SERIOUS, AREN'T YOU?
Yes. It felt wrong to go and not ask you to come along.
I would want to be asked, if the roles were reversed.

NAH.
I'M GOOD.
If you change your mind.
HUH.
IT'S BLANK.
"YOU'RE NOT GETTING AWAY WITH THIS!"

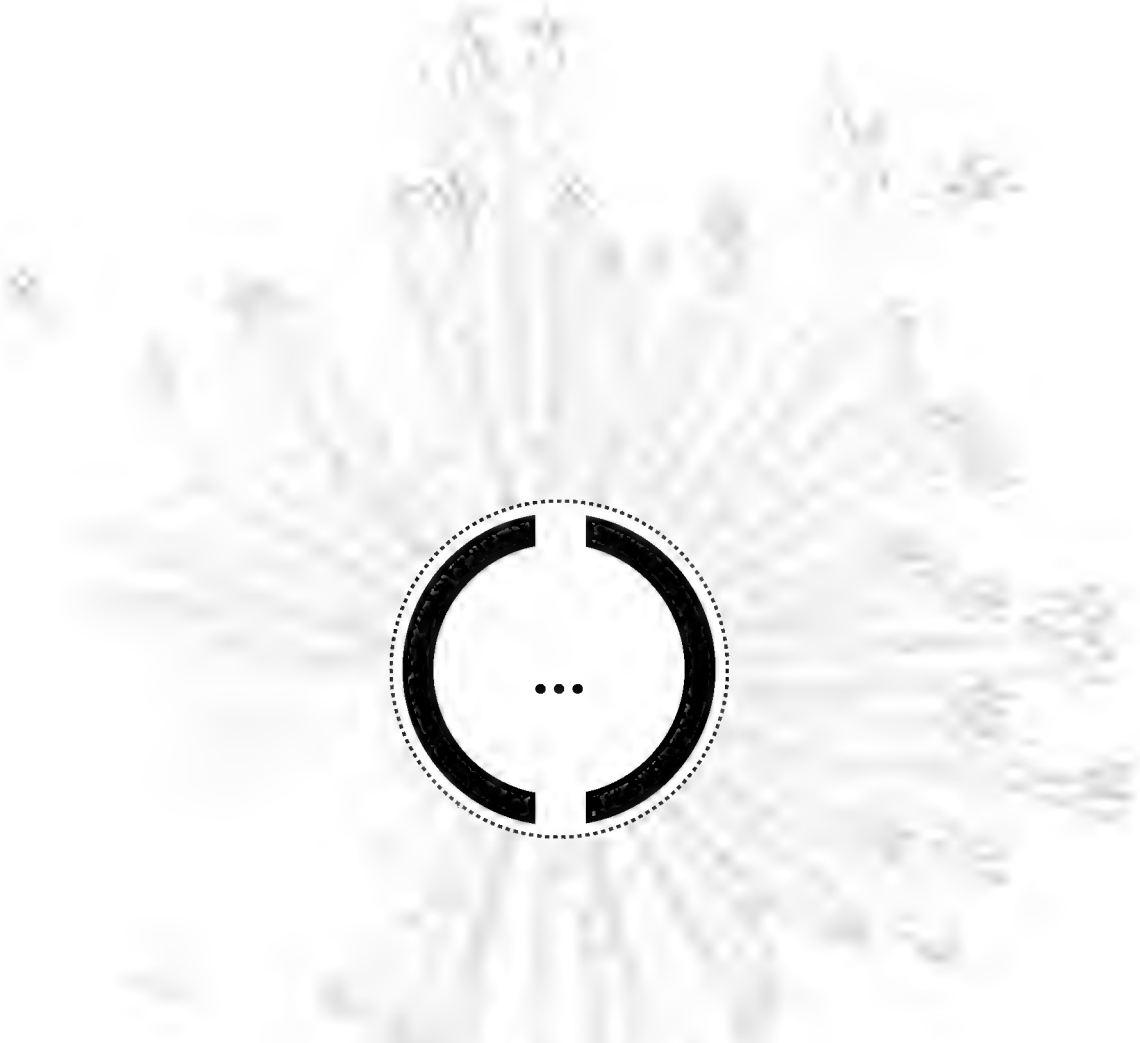
WE'RE GOING TO STOP YOU!

Now, Reed. Why would you lie to yourself like that?
How can you stop me when you know neither where I'm going nor what I'm going to do?
And I promise you, by the time you do figure it out, I will have already left you long behind.
My path, you see, is set. My course fixed.
WE'LL FOLLOW YOU.
WE'LL FIND YOU.
The Bridge controller is set to purge and randomize as soon as I travel through.
You might be able to find where I went if I didn't run the sequencing through the gateway. But I did...and as we both know, that kind of biological encoding is the best encryption under this, or any other, sun.
IT CAN BE DONE. ANYTHING CAN BE DONE.
Yes, but the time it would take. It's measured in years, decades even...
Do you really want to find me that badly?

THAT DEPENDS. WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING TO DO?
I'm going someplace I can call *my own*.
Someplace I can create as was intended at my creation.
OH GOD...I KNOW WHAT HE'S GOING TO DO. WE HAVE TO STOP HIM WHILE WE STILL CAN.
DO IT! DO IT NOW!

Finished?

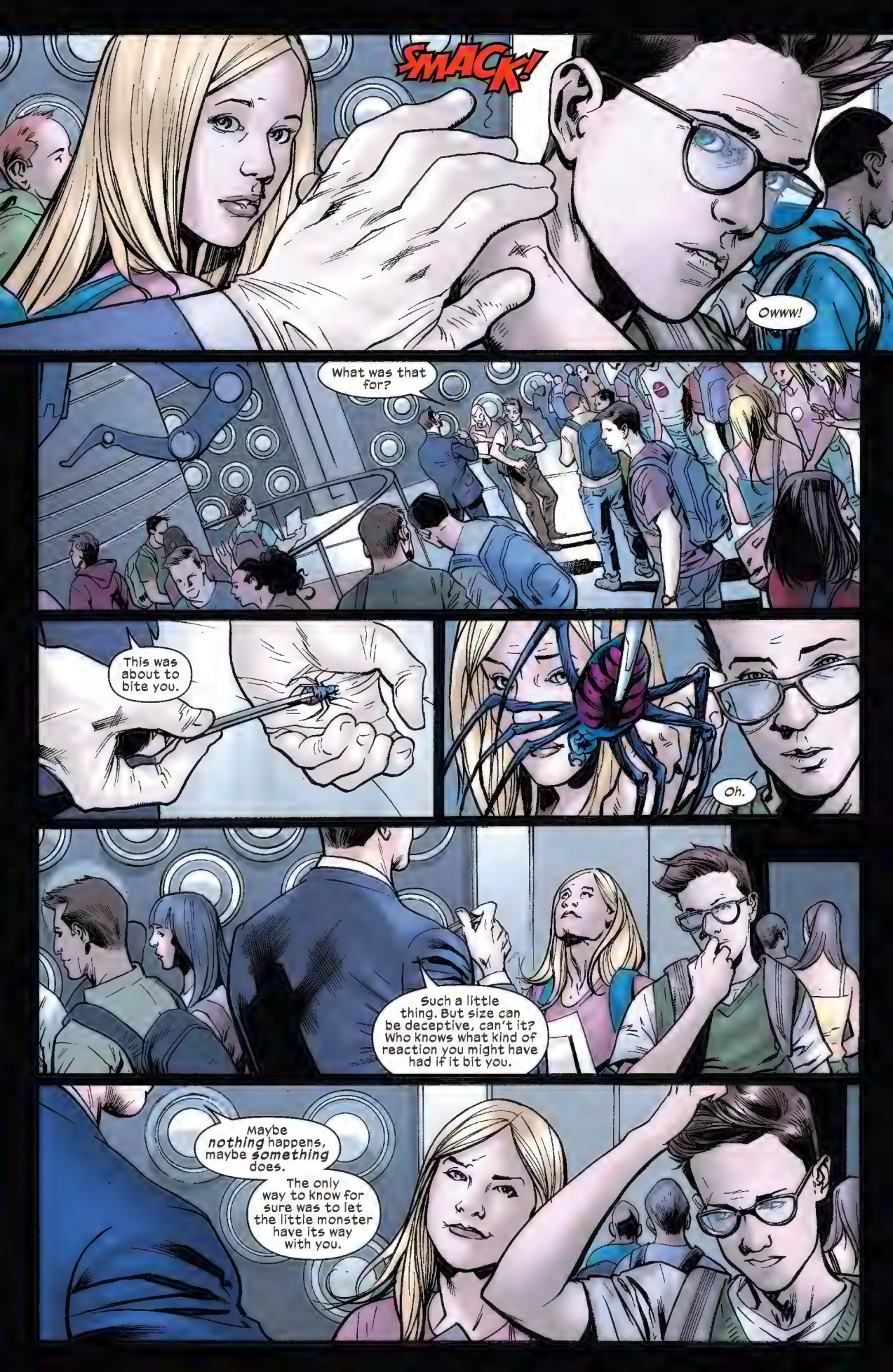
YOU KNOW BETTER THAN THAT.
Do I? I've often wondered, if our roles had been reversed, would I be any different? Would you?
It's why I waited--why I left this trail for you to follow.
It was for this moment. So I could ask you one simple question:
If you could do it all again--if you could truly change things--if you had the chance...
...would you erase me from existence?
...
...
YES.
I'll keep that in mind.



EPILOGUE:
“GREAT ARTISTS STEAL”

Now.
But also then.
You're late, Peter Parker.
What a surprise.
I know, Liz, I know. Something came up. Something always comes up.
Whatever, you're here now...this better be good.
So where do you want to--?
We should go that way. The east wing.
Dr. Schwinner has built some new machine. There's supposed to be a demonstration, and I don't want to miss it.
Wow. Look! There it is.
Maybe it's just me, but it feels like this could be the thing that changes the world.

If I could have everyone's attention, please...
This... *this* is the *Isotope Genome Accelerator.*
Hrmpt. I think you're easily impressed, Parker.
I think I just dream big.
Dream is the right word...
"...because if you think that one day that's going to be you up there, wowing the world with what you've done...
"Well, I don't see it happening. I think you're just an average guy, getting ready to have an average life."
But hey, I could be wrong. Who knows, Parker...
...maybe you'll get *lucky.*

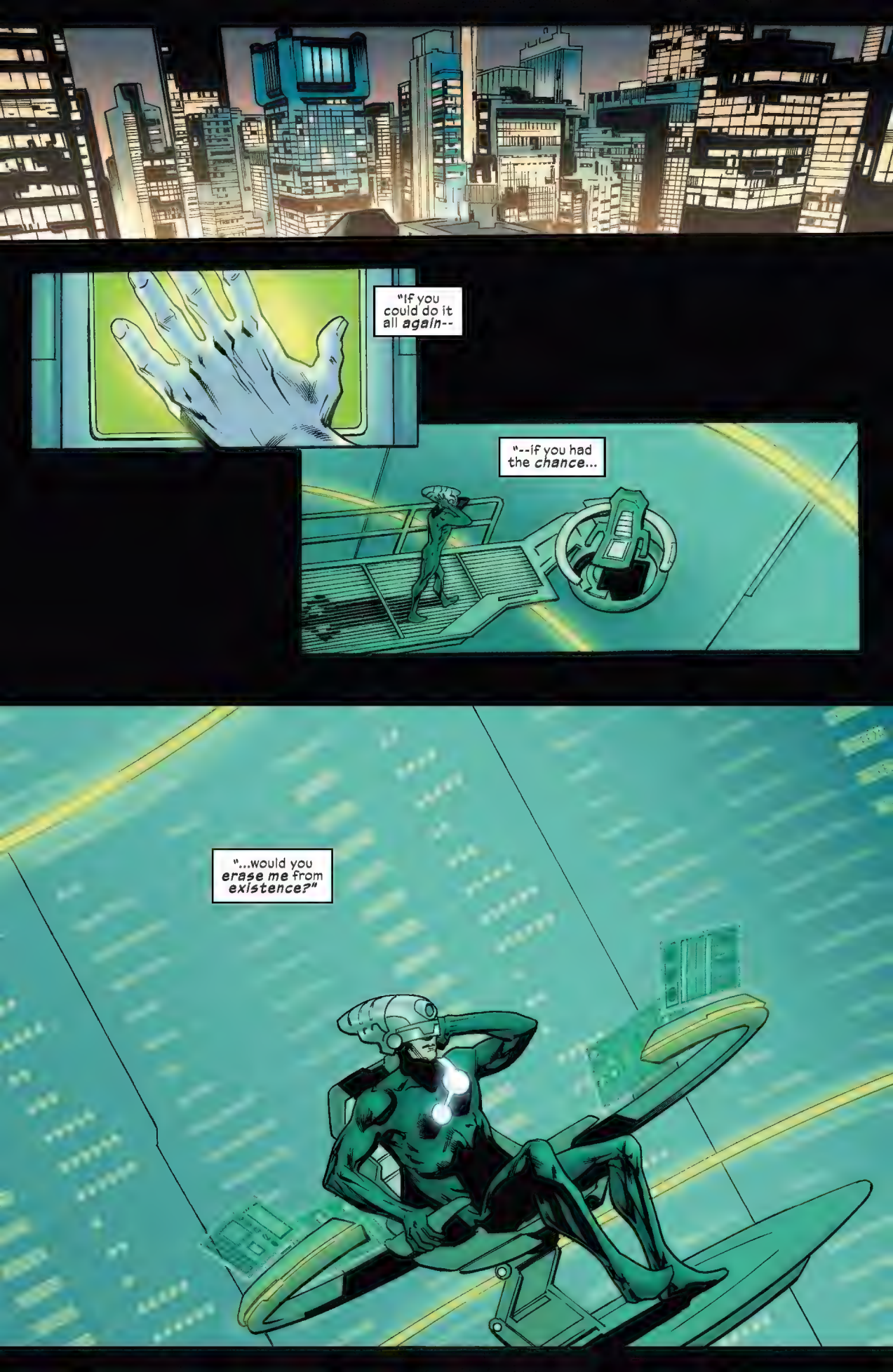

SMACK!
Owww!
What was that for?
This was about to bite you.
Oh.
Such a little thing. But size can be deceptive, can't it? Who knows what kind of reaction you might have had if it bit you.
Maybe *nothing* happens, maybe *something* does.
The only way to know for sure was to let the little monster have its way with you.

I, however, would have had to let it happen while I watched...
And with such power--as insignificant in this instance as it seems--comes no small measure of responsibility.
And who really wants to live in a world where men like me stand by and do nothing?
I know I don't.

#1 FOIL VARIANT BY **BRYAN HITCH & ALEX SINCLAIR**

2

CHAPTER TWO:
“DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE”


"If you could do it all *again*--
"--if you had the *chance*...
"...would you *erase me* from *existence?*"

...
...
YES.
I'll keep that in mind.
"And so, what exactly does one do with the full knowledge of their enemies--and the unlimited capacity to engage them--before they even have the faintest idea that you exist?
"It's simple, really. Whatever one wants.
"Of course, there will be differences in another universe. Deviations and branching possibilities...
"A twisted mirror which casts only similar reflections.

"Still, there is an *Asgard*.
"And with it, a son of lightning and thunder to deal with. A king of lies to place on a throne...
"A Bifrost to shatter.
"A rocket launch to delay by hours, and a cosmic storm missed.
"The fantastic reduced to something...*more manageable*.
"However, regardless of my actions, mankind will still be slavish to its nature--*there will still be wars and weapons of wars*...
"...and men who make such things.
STONE STARK

"Bullets will always be fired. Bombs will always explode...
"There will be fallout to manage, and it will be. By one monstrous means or another.
"But there will also be vacuums.
"Missing bits of history that seem impossible not to be there.
"For example, I found no man in the ice to murder. It seems this world would never have had a super-soldier to lead them...
"No paragon of a better time full of better men.
"It was fitting to find a world that craves me.
"Once, I remade myself--from ordinary hero to Maker.
"Once, I remade a city--and in it, I lived a thousand years and crashed the future into the present.
"But I look back now on all I accomplished with nothing but regret...
"...and the shame of a man who imagined much, much too small.
"I can do *so much better.*"

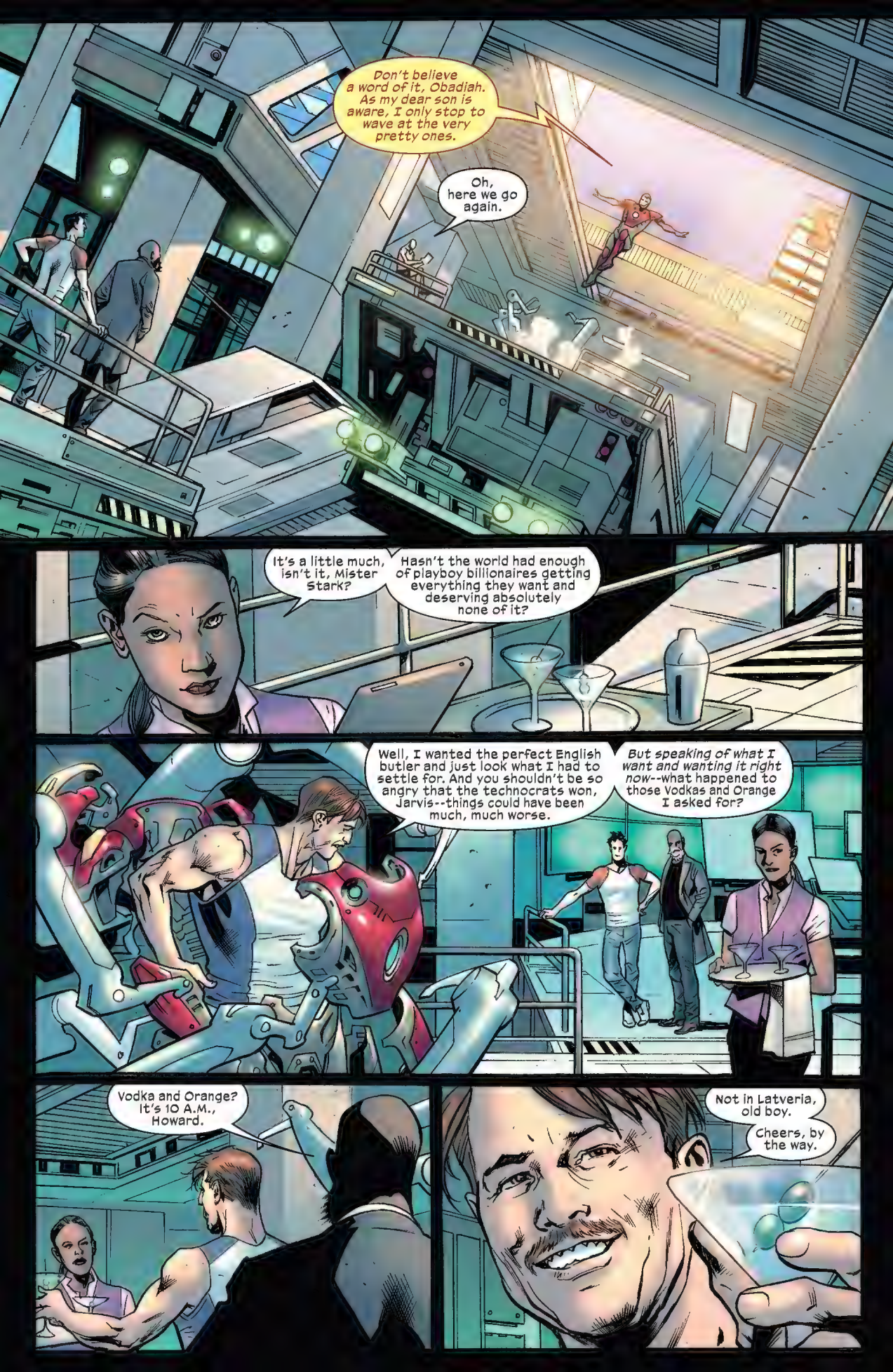
MAKER MEMORY LOG

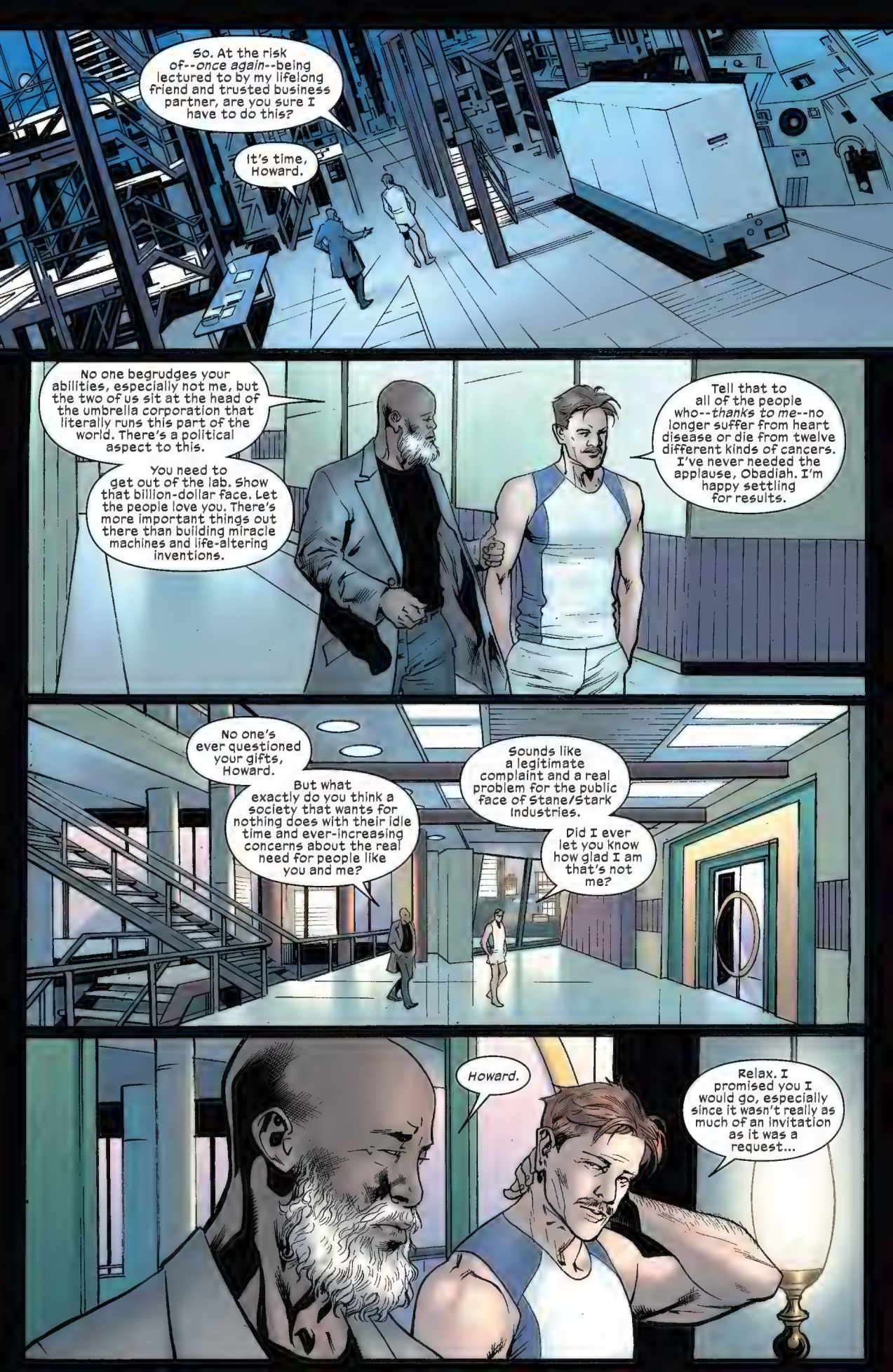
ARCHIVAL DATA [BR_616] ***REVISED***

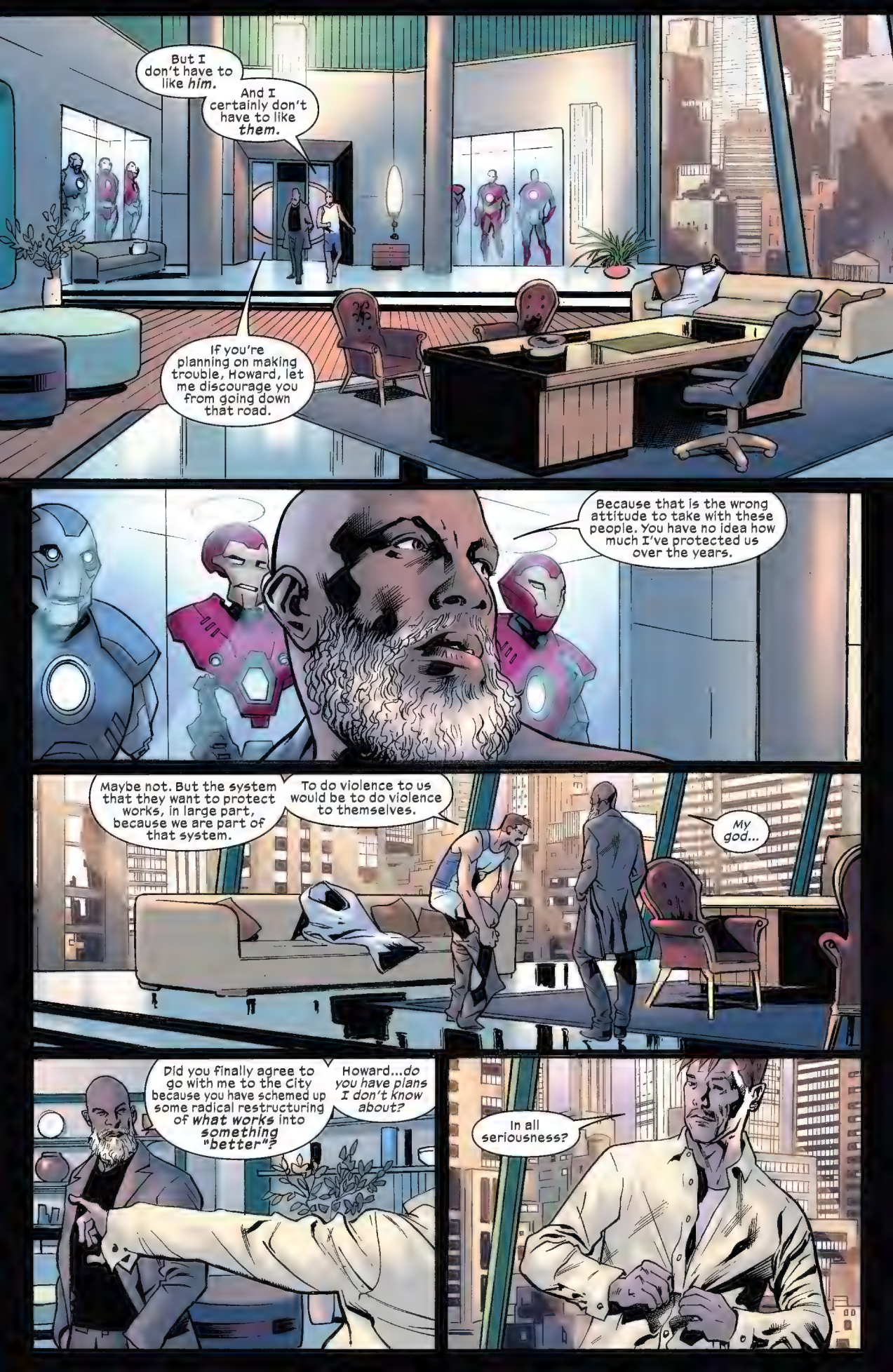
WORLD EXPERIMENT: 6160

NAME	ORIGIN FILE	STATUS	NODE [REPOSITORY]	ARTIFACT
Jim Hammond	ZJYAU12	Deceased	12	Android Brain
Steven Rogers	IOD89GH	Undefined	--	--
James Buchanan Barnes	MWYJI21	Deceased	12	Blood Sample
Robert Grayson	BTW2900	Inactive	08	Quantum Bands
Jack Monroe	QOPKU03	Inactive	02	Blood Sample
Thor Odinson	OJTZA67	Captive	03	Destroyer Seed
Howard Stark	HYGTE1S_var	Controlled	07	Stane/Stark dBase
Reed Richards	LOSPE2A	Controlled	13-18	Dedicated Library
Susan Storm	LOSPE2B	Deceased	13	Blood Sample
Jonathan Lowell Storm	LOSPE2C	Deceased	13	Blood Sample
Benjamin Jacob Grimm	LOSPE2D	Deceased	13	Blood Sample
Henry Jonathan Pym	YJNS719	Inactive	06	Pym Generator
Robert Bruce Banner	UBB128B	Controlled	04	Blood Sample
Peter Benjamin Parker	LLOM223	Inactive	04	Biological Catalyst
Janet Van Dyne	PPLU17X	Inactive	01	Pym Generator
Stephen Vincent Strange	90128BQ	Captive	09	Eye of Agamotto

Manhattan.
Is this *something new?*
Or does he always show off like this when he takes the new suit out for a spin?
Every single time, Mister Stane. Sometimes I don't think Dad considers a test run complete until he's waved at every lady in upper-middle management in the city.


Don't believe a word of it, Obadiah. As my dear son is aware, I only stop to wave at the very pretty ones.
Oh, here we go again.
It's a little much, isn't it, Mister Stark?
Hasn't the world had enough of playboy billionaires getting everything they want and deserving absolutely none of it?
Well, I wanted the perfect English butler and just look what I had to settle for. And you shouldn't be so angry that the technocrats won, Jarvis--things could have been much, much worse.
But speaking of what I want and wanting it right now--what happened to those Vodkas and Orange I asked for?
Vodka and Orange? It's 10 A.M., Howard.
Not in Latveria, old boy.
Cheers, by the way.


So. At the risk of--*once again*--being lectured to by my lifelong friend and trusted business partner, are you sure I have to do this?
It's time, Howard.
No one begrudges your abilities, especially not me, but the two of us sit at the head of the umbrella corporation that literally runs this part of the world. There's a political aspect to this.
You need to get out of the lab. Show that billion-dollar face. Let the people love you. There's more important things out there than building miracle machines and life-altering inventions.
Tell that to all of the people who--*thanks to me*--no longer suffer from heart disease or die from twelve different kinds of cancers. I've never needed the applause, Obadiah. I'm happy settling for results.
No one's ever questioned your gifts, Howard.
But what exactly do you think a society that wants for nothing does with their idle time and ever-increasing concerns about the real need for people like you and me?
Sounds like a legitimate complaint and a real problem for the public face of Stane/Stark Industries.
Did I ever let you know how glad I am that's not me?
Howard.
Relax. I promised you I would go, especially since it wasn't really as much of an invitation as it was a request...


But I don't have to like *him*.
And I certainly don't have to like *them*.
If you're planning on making trouble, Howard, let me discourage you from going down that road.
Because that is the wrong attitude to take with these people. You have no idea how much I've protected us over the years.
Maybe not. But the system that they want to protect works, in large part, because we are part of that system.
To do violence to us would be to do violence to themselves.
My god...
Did you finally agree to go with me to the City because you have schemed up some radical restructuring of *what works* into *something "better"*?
Howard...*do you have plans I don't know about?*
In all seriousness?

Maybe I look out the window and I question what we've done and what we've made. I think of all my gifts--*all my abilities*--and I wonder, is this it? Is the world-as-it-is the sum total of what I am capable of?
I tell you, old friend, I whisper these questions to myself at night and I can no longer accept the answers.
Does that make sense to you?
More than you can imagine.
Well then, we'd best be on our way. Wouldn't want to be late--wouldn't want to disappoint our fellow world leaders. *Pepper?*
The jet is ready and waiting in loft three...
Your flight is scheduled to be four and a half hours. Which should be more than enough time to finish that research paper you're working on, hold the conference call with your engineering team in Alaska, and take your regularly scheduled one-hour power nap.
Thank you, Pepper.
Well, Obadiah, that takes care of my agenda. What's on yours?
Just one thing, Howard...
It's time for you to meet your *Maker.*

Latveria.
...and so, after two weeks of having disappeared without any indication of how long he--and the City itself--would be shielded and in isolation, word has reached us...
...that the doors of the City will be thrown open and the great convergence of incorporated nation-states will occur. To that end, attending the day's events is a who's who of this golden generation...
...and there they are. Obadiah Stane and the mercurial Howard Stark--the finest of American technocrats.
True wizards of innovation who relentlessly force their nation forward...

...it is said that the enlightened children of eternal light shine as brightly as they do because they rest in the shadow of the protective hand of their highest holy man, the legendary and immortal Hulk...
...a testament to the power of serenity and the epitome of those who resist the seductive call of rage and revenge...
...and with the unforeseen consolidation of the three Pacific clans who could lay claim to the seat of power, it was the open Hand of the ascendent Harada-Yoshida alliance that gained supremacy of the...

...only here under the white flag of peace, the Rasputin family needs no introduction.
Infamy and fear precede them. Biology and evolution relentlessly pursue them...
...and that's just the...hold on a second.
I'm getting word now that, yes--as the world watches--the City is beginning to open.

Well...
I'm waiting.

Quickly now--and careful!

Obadiah!
What the hell is--?
No idea. You don't happen to be wearing your portable suit, do you?
You told me not to come armed.
And when, exactly, did you start listening to me?
Fair point. I won't ever make that mistake again.

That's a good idea. As a *general rule*, never listen to someone who doesn't follow their own *advice*.
Get clear of this.
I'll handle it.

AARRGGGHH!

Obadiah!
Dammit. Suit's going critical...
I'm sorry, Howard...
...I'm not going to--

Howard...

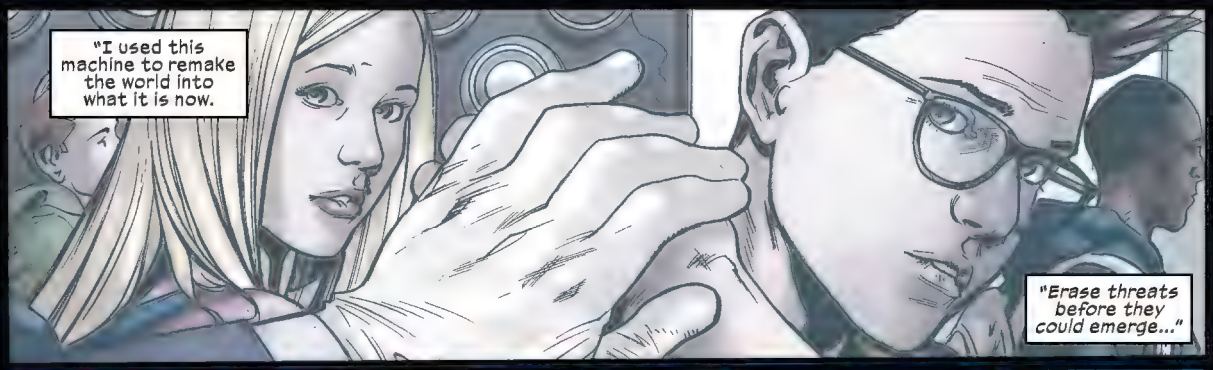
Howard, you can wake up now.
Can you hear me?
Wha--?
What's happened?
Terrible news, I'm afraid.
Obadiah Stane is dead.
...
I... I saw it happen.
I wish there was time to grieve...
...but time is something we have very little of at the moment.
Take a look.
What the...?

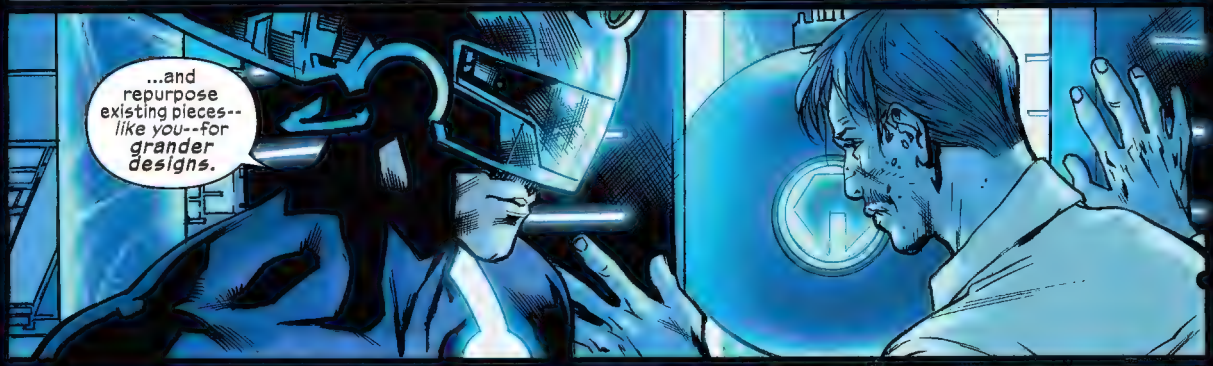
Who are they?
They are from *the future.* Temporal suicide bombers here to erase me--*and possibly you*--from *history.*
Why?
That's the question, *isn't it?*
Does it make you fear what terrible things you're going to do in your future? Or does it anger you that they tried to rob you of the chance to have one?
Honestly, I'm not sure I've ever bought into the idea of static temporal states.
No? No *cause* and *effect* looping around to eat each other? *No snakes? No tails?*
Want to *find out?*
How are you going to--?

Why are we here?
Have we done something wrong?
Is there some reaso--?
Shhhh.
In the City, we've gotten rather good at genetic engineering: cellular legacies, protein archaeology and the recognizing of historical genetic markers.
We did a regressive scan of each of the future soldiers and discovered that almost all of them are identical designer clones--*engineered recombinants*--of seed DNA.
Then we *tracked it* to the *source*.
You can't possibly be going to--
How could you?
How c--?
Aaiii--

...!!!IEEEEEEE!!!
Well. Normally, I loathe the sword instead of the scalpel, but somewhere in the future I just erased an entire army from existence.
I guess we learned a little something there, didn't we?
You idiot...
You know they're going to do the same to you, right?
Find you in your crib. Erase you and what you've done.
That won't work with me.
Why not?
Because I wasn't born here.
Not in this place, on this planet...or even this universe.
I emerged fully formed. If they come for me...it'll have to be at the height of my powers.
They did. And my friend died because of it.
Hmmm. Come with me.
I want to show you something.

This is an *Immortus Engine.*
Variable power source. The transfer coils are unstable molecules.
I can't see why someone would choose to build it that way, unless... *oh...*
You made a *time machine.*
This is why...this has to be why they came here...
It is *damaged.* Currently *non-functional,* but--
You have to *destroy it.*
Forward and backward, bending wills to my design.
I wouldn't even if I could.
Look around. Do you think this perfectly ordered society you live in is how things were supposed to go?
It wasn't. I promise you.


"I used this machine to remake the world into what it is now.
"Erase threats before they could emerge..."


...and repurpose existing pieces--like you--for grander designs.

It's...it's unconscionable--unbelievable. You have to understand the full scope of what you've done, right?
You annihilated the future--you destroyed their past--this won't be the end of it...
This was just your first encounter.

No. It was the second.

The first was two weeks ago...

Our meeting left quite an... *impression.*
...
How are you not dead?
My body is not like yours. For self-preservation's sake, I chose to separate and redistribute my brain and vital organs long ago.
I will heal and it will take time, but I did suffer *some damage.*
My memory is...*impaired. Flawed* and *fractured...*
I can't trust what I remember because I am remembering things... *incorrectly.*
What I do know is that I need you. More than anyone else on *this world* and *maybe others.*
Why?

Because, Howard Stark...
...I believe *you* are the one who *built this.*

3

The Funeral of Obadiah Stane.

I'm sorry, Dad.

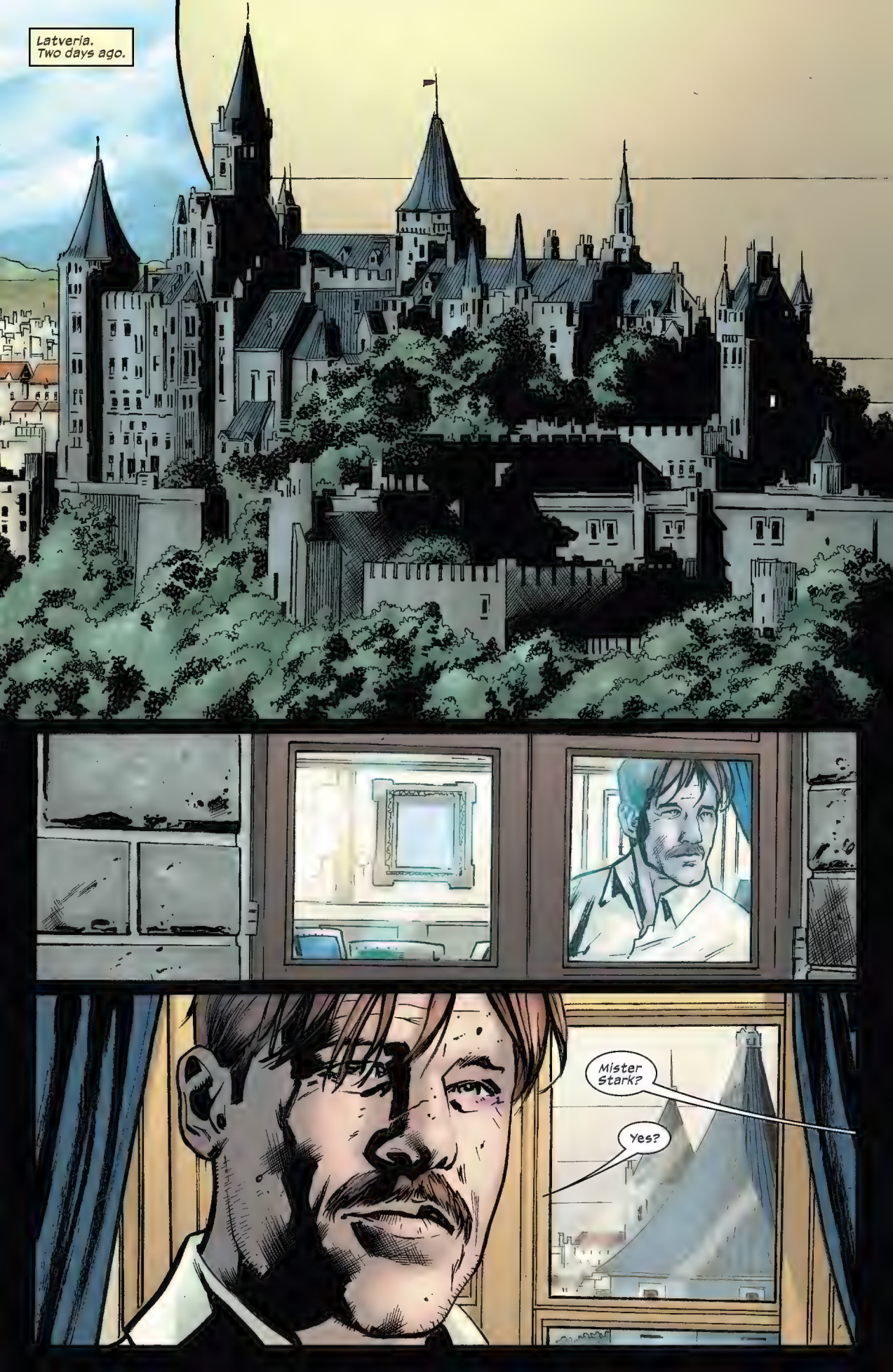
This is just so terrible.

Here lies
OBADIAH
STANE
Sigh.
It certainly is.

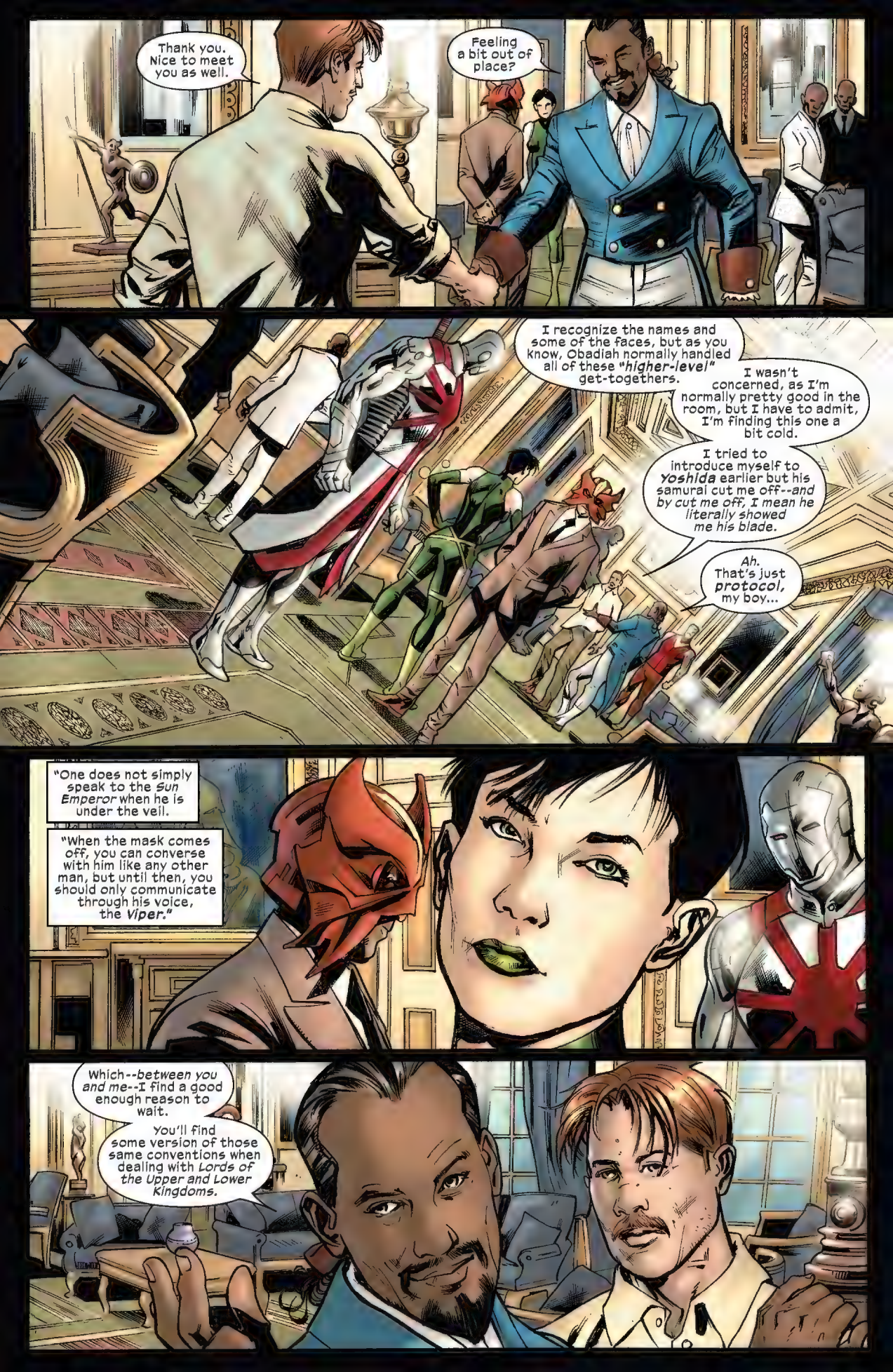
Sleep well, old friend.

...
What are you going to do now?
Tony, how would you feel if I told you to pack your bags because we're getting on the plane and running away to live a very quiet, very small, very peaceful life?
Sounds amazing. And I'd love to say yes, but we both know that's not going to happen, *is it?*
No. It's not.
I saw the attack on the feed, but then they cut all coverage--*it was a total blackout*. Nothing for an entire day. Then you just showed up--back home with Obadiah's body.
What happened, Dad?
What happened in *Latveria?*

CHAPTER THREE: "THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS"


Latveria.
Two days ago.
Mister Stark?
Yes?

I wanted to welcome you and introduce myself...
I am *Emmanuel Da Costa.*
I have to say, I've followed your work for years.
Unfortunate that it happens under these circumstances, but it's still a pleasure to meet you.


Thank you. Nice to meet you as well.
Feeling a bit out of place?
I recognize the names and some of the faces, but as you know, Obadiah normally handled all of these "higher-level" get-togethers.
I wasn't concerned, as I'm normally pretty good in the room, but I have to admit, I'm finding this one a bit cold.
I tried to introduce myself to Yoshida earlier but his samurai cut me off--and by cut me off, I mean he literally showed me his blade.
Ah. That's just protocol, my boy...
"One does not simply speak to the Sun Emperor when he is under the veil.
"When the mask comes off, you can converse with him like any other man, but until then, you should only communicate through his voice, the Viper."
Which--between you and me--I find a good enough reason to wait.
You'll find some version of those same conventions when dealing with Lords of the Upper and Lower Kingdoms.

Ra only speaks when the sun is waxing and is silent when it wanes. The inverse is true for the full moon of Khonshu.
Ah. Here we go. Now here's a genial fellow.
Howard, this is Henri Dugarry.
Henri currently holds both the Sword of Might and the Amulet of Right, granting him providence over the entirety of the European Union.
Bonjour, Monsieur Stark. Quelle époque intéressante que celle dans laquelle nous nous trouvons.
Interesting is certainly a word for it.

And *discord* would be another.
Any word yet on what the purpose or meaning was behind today's attack?
I haven't heard a thing.
Nor have I, *Monsieur* Hulk.
... I just got here.
Yes. And I regret the events that have led you here, Mr. Stark.
And while I--*of course*--find such random violence unacceptable, I cannot help but notice that the intentional malice against this collective of ours implies a certain amount of planning and forethought.
Behind that, I suspect a desire to destabilize all that we have built--*a blow against our proactive, peaceful union.*
Should such mindless--*and pointless*--action prove to be the intent, well...
That would make me quite... angry.

Okay, let's hear it!!!
Who the hell attacked us today?
And where--*in that same hell he calls home*--is the ***Maker?*** We need to get on with this--*take action*--and make whoever that was ***regret being born.***
Une femme si colérique.
Definitely. But I'm honestly surprised you would meet with her or her companions.
Excuse-moi?
Whatever do you mean?
The ***Rasputins.*** They're the ***enemy.***

Did Obadiah not explain how any of this works to you?
From time to time he would ask if I wanted to know how the sausage was made. It never really interested me.
...
I see now maybe I should have listened.
I promise you, Mr. Stark, however it might appear to the world at large:
There are *no enemies* in *this room.*
What? I think you're forgetting the Eastern conflict? And that event in the Pacific? And what about the winter Apocalypse? *I could go on...*
Ask any man on the street and they would disagree. *As would history. As would I.*
That is the world as *you know it.*
Look around this place and you will see that there are seven major territories represented.
And though we have not yet fully circled this sun, when our time has come--*each of our nations will play...the "adversary."* Just as the *Rasputins* do now.

While inside our non-adversarial nations, we rally our citizens against this great evil, and all participate in whatever pageantry is required.
Then, at the end of a generation, *another territory*--*one that has spent the previous age becoming more and more belligerent*--assumes the *"rogue state"* mantle while the previous one engages in a generation of performative regret.
Around and around it goes. Focusing the citizens' eyes on external threats and away from any internal failures of their own territory--
--maintaining the illusion of peace in an illusory time of war.
The Maker is a pragmatic and visionary man. He believes this is good because it works. And it does work--so we accept it as the greater good.
...
My god...
That might be the most insidious thing I've ever heard.

Wait until you hear whose turn it is next.
What?
We'll get to that. But first, you need to understand there is a very good reason behind this.
Care to fathom a guess?
No. Not really.
The problem has been studied. The Maker did several iterations of experimental societies inside the City. He has shown us the results.
Peace--achieved, coerced or enforced--is never a successful long-term strategy.
The truth is...humanity is incapable of accepting it.
To be fair. Not all of us agree with such universal assumptions, Mr. Stark.
I believe that some people--many, even--are capable of achieving a state of inner calm that presents as peace. I have to believe it. I've devoted my life to it.

But most are incapable of maintaining *that state* in *perpetuity*.
They can't handle the *quiet*. They can't let their *action be inaction*. They can't maintain serenity with all the hysterical babbling that surrounds them.
I wish it wasn't true.
But *it is*...
...and always *has been*.

Of course, focusing on the shortcomings of mankind's nature makes it easier for those in this room to gloss over the other major reason we do this:
The little people hate us--we giants who rule the land.
It's not how it used to be in ages gone by. Back then it wouldn't have mattered--the powerful would just roll right over the powerless if need be. We could build an empire on their bones, if we wanted...
But now they are a *collective--instantaneously aware of just how many of them there are*--and how much they uniformly hate people like us.

Which is why it's necessary to give them something else to focus on.
Which we have gotten *very good* at *doing*.
I said I found all this insidious before you got here.
That might have been *too kind* a word.
Choose whatever word you wish. It won't change who they are and who you are...
Because you, Howard Stark--*rich, brilliant and powerful*--
--are *one of us*.

Doesn't feel that way.
But I do have one question.
Of course. Ask anything you want.
So if all this--*this well-choreographed dance of yours*--is to keep the people happy so that we can get on with the important work of what giants do...
...do you mind telling me exactly what that *real work* is?
Ah, Mister Stark...
Now we're *getting somewhere.*

THE WORLD

THE WORLD

AS REMADE BY THE MAKER

- THE NORTH AMERICAN UNION
- REGIONAL SUBSIDIARIES

- THE SOCIETY OF SOUTH AMERICA
- REGIONAL CLUBS
- FRACTIONAL CULTURES

- THE EUROPEAN COALITION
- REGIONAL GOVERNORS
- FIEFDOMS

- THE CITY
- LATVERIAN TERRITORIES

- THE UPPER AND LOWER KINGDOMS
- REGIONAL DYNASTIES
- LOCAL TEMPLES

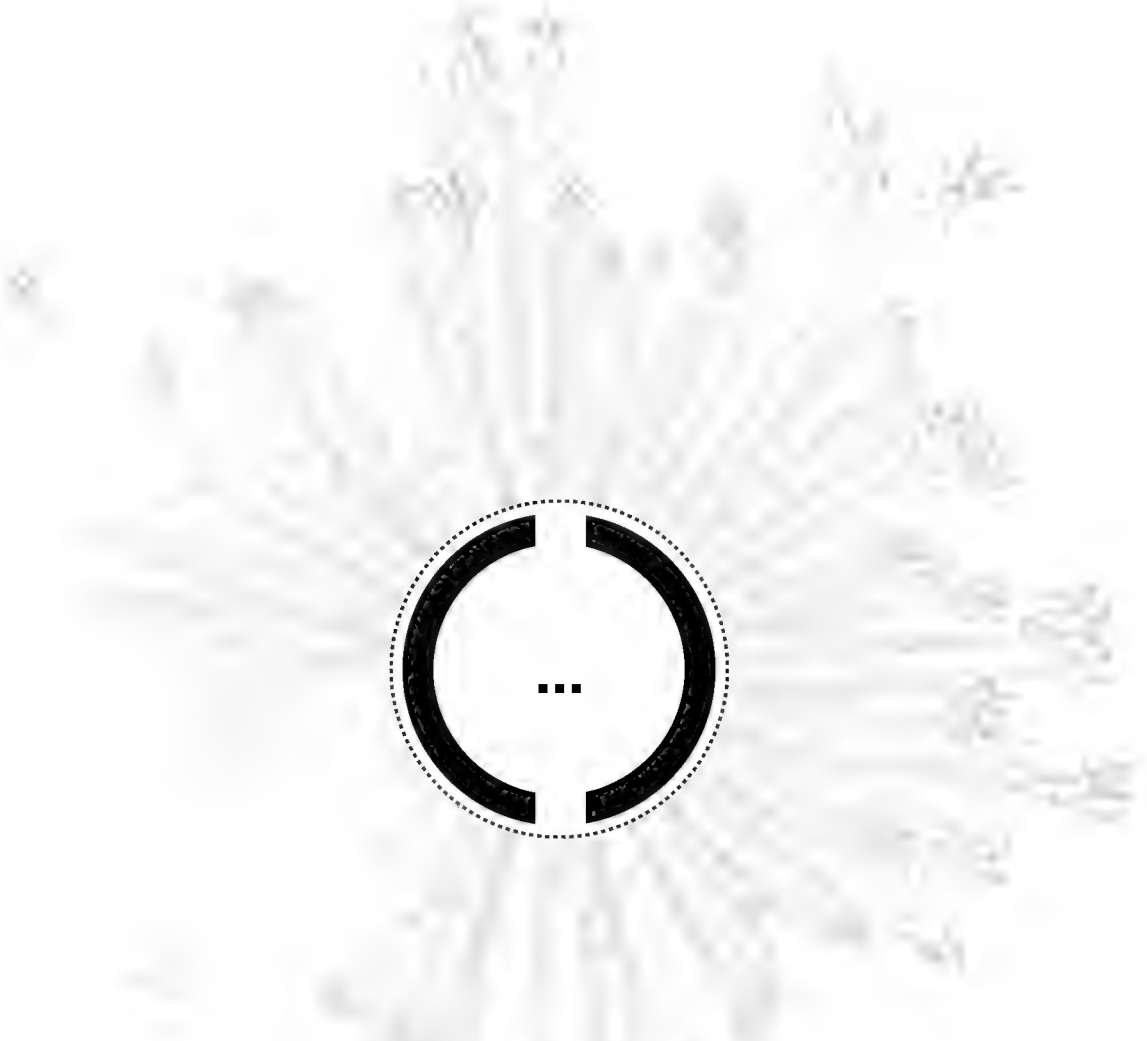
- THE EURASIAN REPUBLIC
- REGIONAL DIRECTORS
- LOCAL SCHOOLS

- THE CHILDREN OF ETERNAL LIGHT
- THE SHADOWS OF THE IMMORTAL HAND

- HI NO KUNI ("LAND OF FIRE")
- DAIMYOS

- UNDISCOVERED TERRITORY

1963-2023



NOW.
Ten minutes back to the tower, sir.
The jet is on standby.
Thanks.

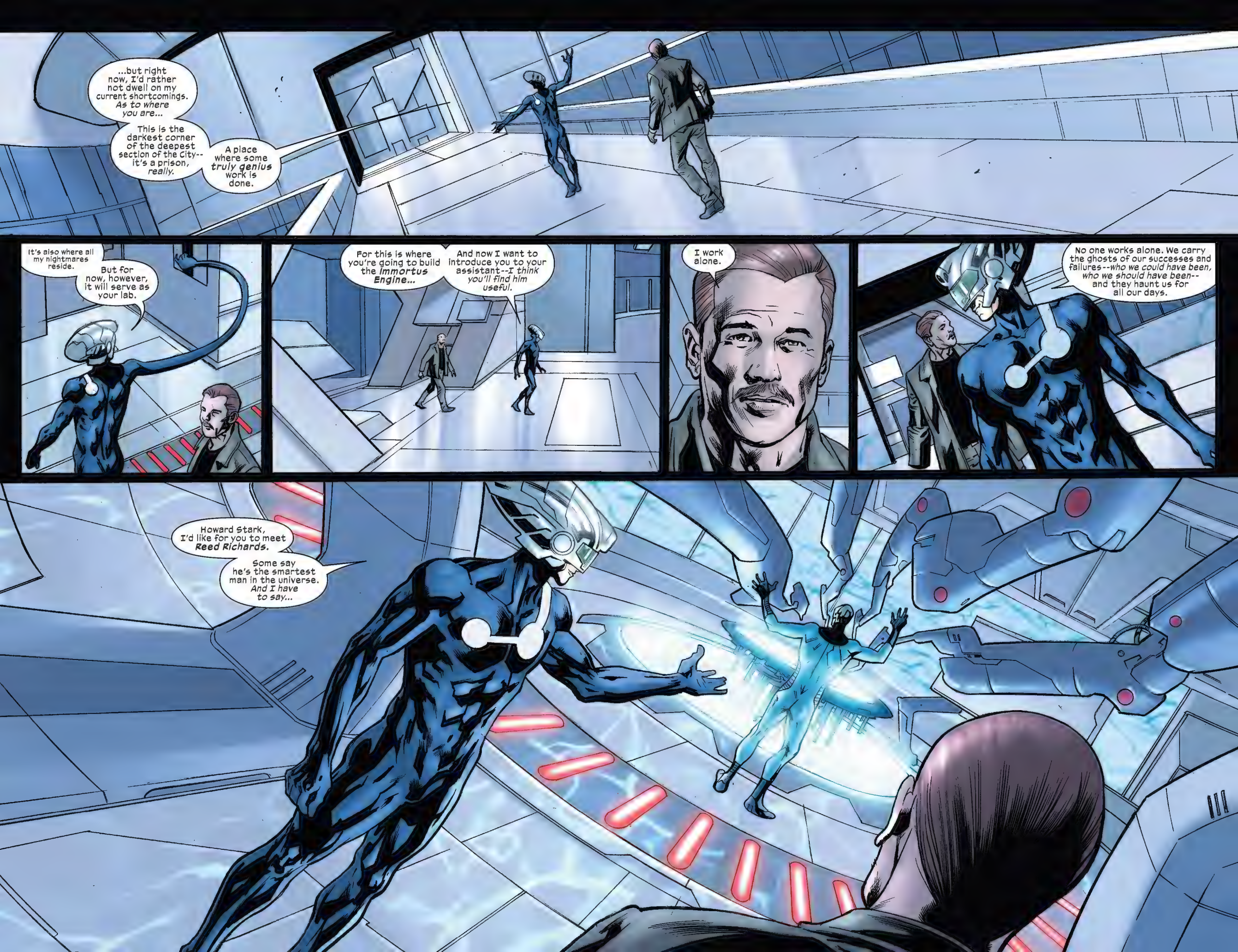
So what are you going to do, Dad?
Too many variables for a definitive answer, Son.
The scale of it. The appetite of those people. The inhumanity masquerading as cold logic. I just don't know...
You got any bright ideas?
...
I think you should *fight them.*
Some people might say that would be us proving their exact point.
And then there's the small matter of "*I might lose.*"
There's right and wrong, Dad. And this is *wrong.*
No, it's worse. Because you're mistaking right and wrong for good and evil.

Do you really think Obadiah knew?
I don't know...
I'd like to pretend that he didn't know and he was the guy I always thought he was.
I'll probably never get a real answer to that. I'm not sure I want one.
What?
You should fight them.
And win.

Listen, son...I'm still processing what I've learned...
I have some ideas, but I'm still getting to the edges of where I might start...
So give your old man a couple weeks before you really start being disappointed in me, okay?
Dad...
...you know I can help.
Anthony, the point of the exercise--the reason why I would even want to fight and win--is so you can outlive us all.
But I promise, if I need you, I'll let you know.
Okay.

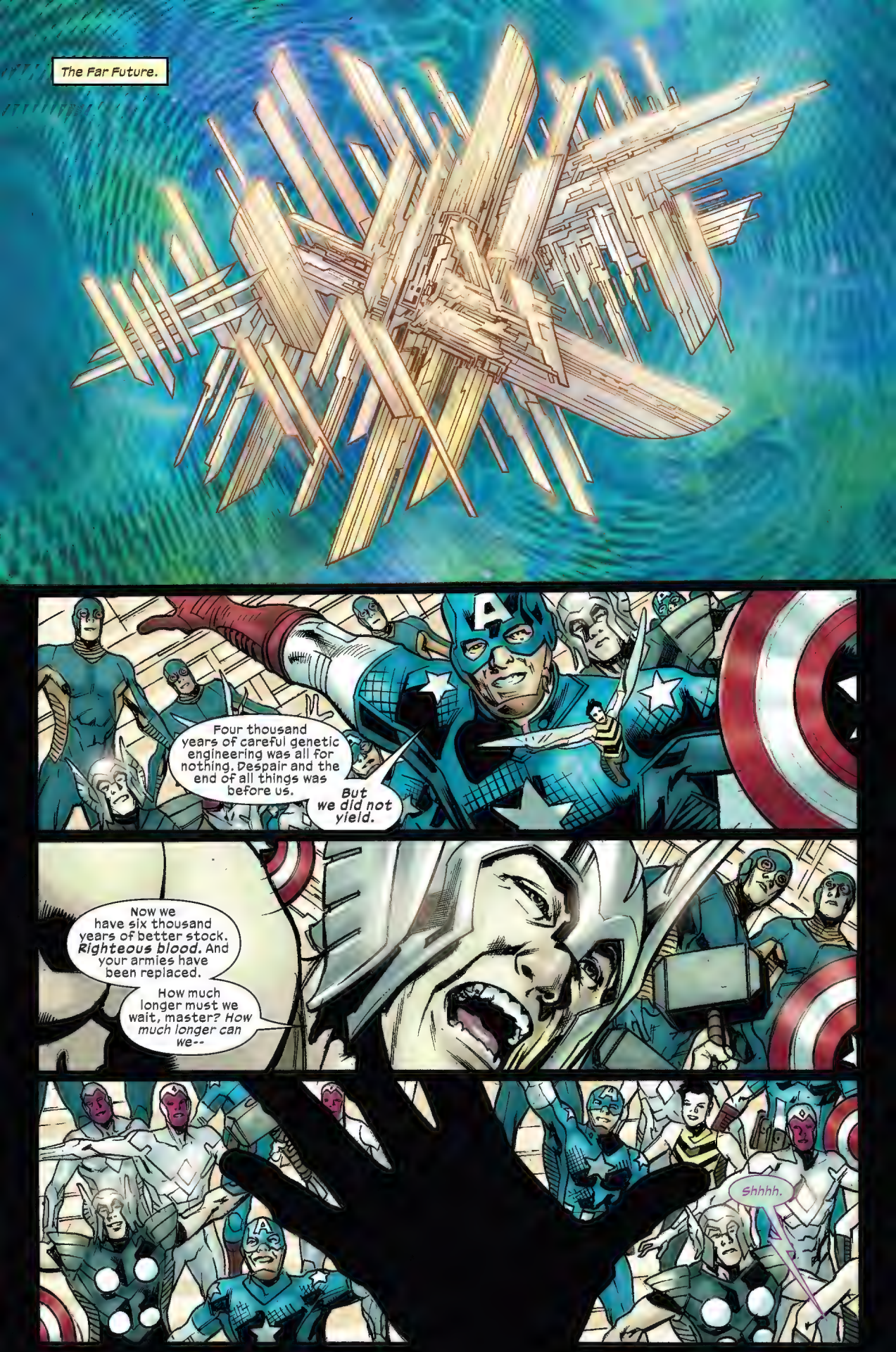
Dad?
Yeah?
Be careful.
That's not how it works, Son...
Careful doesn't come with winning.

The City.
One day ago.
Where are we?
You've never been inside the City, correct?
You know I haven't.
Actually, I don't know that...


...but right now, I'd rather not dwell on my current shortcomings. As to where you are...
This is the darkest corner of the deepest section of the City--it's a prison, really.
A place where some truly genius work is done.
It's also where all my nightmares reside.
But for now, however, it will serve as your lab.
For this is where you're going to build the Immortus Engine...
And now I want to introduce you to your assistant--I think you'll find him useful.
I work alone.
No one works alone. We carry the ghosts of our successes and failures--who we could have been, who we should have been--and they haunt us for all our days.
Howard Stark, I'd like for you to meet Reed Richards.
Some say he's the smartest man in the universe. And I have to say...

...I do agree.

EPILOGUE:
"ALL TOMORROW'S ARMIES"


The Far Future.
Four thousand years of careful genetic engineering was all for nothing. Despair and the end of all things was before us.
But we did not yield.
Now we have six thousand years of better stock. Righteous blood. And your armies have been replaced.
How much longer must we wait, master? How much longer can we--
Shhhh.

Do you see how he hides? In this game we play?
I, ageless and immortal in real time. My adversary, a creature of a temporal vault-- a time thief, if there ever was one.
And what do we say of all pretenders?
Their time will come.
Tell me of my legions.
They are infinite. They are immortal.
They are ready to die.
This pleases me.
It makes me eager.
I have heard your cries...I have heard you ask me...
"Kang, is it time?"

And so I tell you truly...
The time is now.

#3 VARIANT BY **DANIEL ACUÑA**

I know secrets.

That's great.
Does one of them have to do with the secret sauce of polymers in *the City?* Because so far, this resin isn't playing nice with the copper filaments.
Reed, can you hand me the thing with the--
Thanks.
Okay. That's as good as it's going to get. It *should* hold. I hope it holds.
It better hold.
So...
...what kind of *secrets?*
Neither ones whispered, nor the murmurs of the discontent...
Not from conversations overheard, or rumors that take root and become truth.
No, these are the *best* of secrets...
The *sins* the great *Maker* holds deep in his *heart.*
...
I'm listening.

I know where he is *from*. I know how he *made the world* as it is *now*.
I have seen it with my *own eyes* and, until now, have had no one to share it with.
But now I have you, Howard.
Do you want me to show you?
Absolutely. But first things first...
Because when I finish this, we just might have all the time in the world for the other.

AND NOW THERE ARE TWO IMMORTUS ENGINES

Whuff! Okay. I think I'm done.
The coil structure is elegant.
That it mimics the very nature of time is the world letting you know that your choices were correct.
But you might want to consider some kind of feedback mechanism...
Especially if your Immortus Engine is built to go both forward and backward through time--one cannot assume there will be a pause between the two states...
My god...
How did I miss that?
That single microsecond of overlap...there and back...all at once. The literal temporal branching of a human being.
Who knows what would--
Oh, someone knows.
Someone always knows.
Damn. I thought I was finally...
I guess I'm just tired.
Reed, can I ask you something?
Please do.
How long have we been working on this?
It feels like days, but I don't think I could put an exact number on it if I had to.

You're in a temple of abstract time, Howard.
Exactly how does one count without constants? I gave up on marking days and the passing of time long ago.
I'm sorry. It never occurred to me... *I never asked...*
How long have you been here? Trapped in this place?
See that trickle of light there on the wall?
It's the right temperature and color. So at first I thought it was the uncorrupted sun, slowly creeping by as time passed. Seconds, minutes, hours... *longer.*
I marked its progress, counting the passing days, and then--*after studying it for what I believed was months*--I realized that it would ever-so-slightly speed up and slow down.
And then I considered the possibility that it didn't even begin when it should each day.
MONTH...
WEEK?
When I was sure I was right, I told him--*I said it out loud*--knowing he was watching, listening...
I heard his laughter--*and I watched as the light suddenly moved up and down the wall*--artificially reflected, I suppose, by some mechanized mirror he controlled--as if nodding its head in agreement.
This was just the first of many games he has played with me.
Like the mask?

No. He's been very clear about that. This mask is no game at all.
It's who I really am.
This is a fully functional lab. Everything in here works--and while it appears I can come and go as I please, I can never truly escape.
Because I know that all of it is a contrivance to a greater, grander experiment--of which I am now sure I am the subject.
Yes, he tortures me. Yes, he hates me. But I do not know why.
I can help you escape.
Oh, Howard. Don't you understand?
You cannot run from who you are.

CHAPTER FOUR: "YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW"

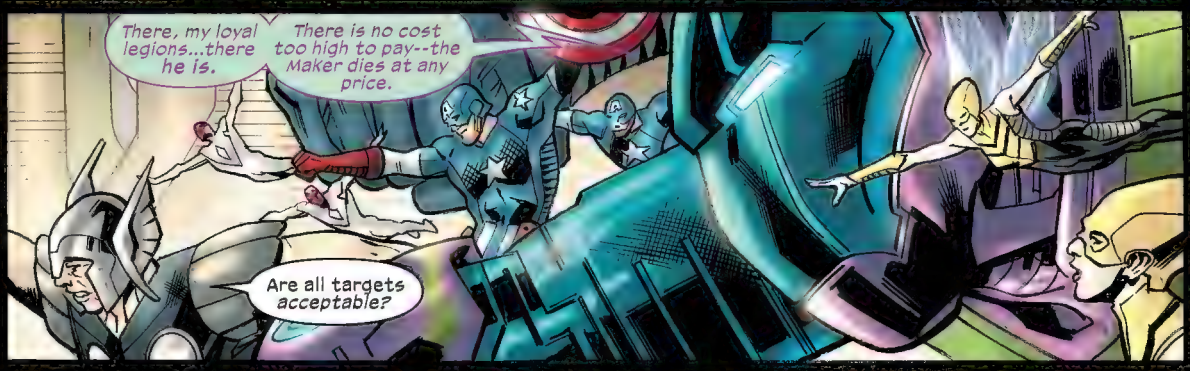
The City.
One week later.
Ready?
The hologram suit is functional. The conduit terminator is acceptable.
But my psyche is...below tolerable thresholds.
Ah. You're worried this might go wrong? That this is goodbye or something like that?
...
Yes.
I understand. I feel the same way. But it's gonna be okay...
I'll see you on the other side.

My loyal swords said that you wanted to see me...
They said you finally had something to show me...
Is it true?
Well done, Mr. Stark.

Tony
"So this is it?"
You've built it. The machine that will enable me to do all the things I've already done.
A way to make this world into the wonder that it now is?
No.
No?
"I simply copied it. Made one of my own--a better version, if I do say so myself.
"The other was made by someone else's hands. Yours, if I had to guess. You just forgot what you had done. Some missing memory of a more whole Maker."

Or maybe I will take this to a previous me, and I will copy it--make a better version of my own.
Maybe that's the way of things. A copy of a copy all the way down.
All you're telling me now is that I should crush it in my hands...be done with the whole unnatural ordeal.
My dear Howard, don't be rash...
"If I have done anything, surely I have shown you that, before all other things, we have a monster from the future who we have to kill."
Power conduit terminator armed.
He's a monster. You're a monster.
I am so tired of choosing between which monsters are more acceptable.
Power conduit terminator linked. Remote access granted.
"You don't deserve me.
"You deserve each other."
Power conduit terminator activated.
What have you done?
I've interrupted the City mainframe...dropped the temporal shield...

"I've opened the door to let the wolves in."



"All but one."

CHILDREN OF TOMORROW!

DEFEND YOUR CITY!

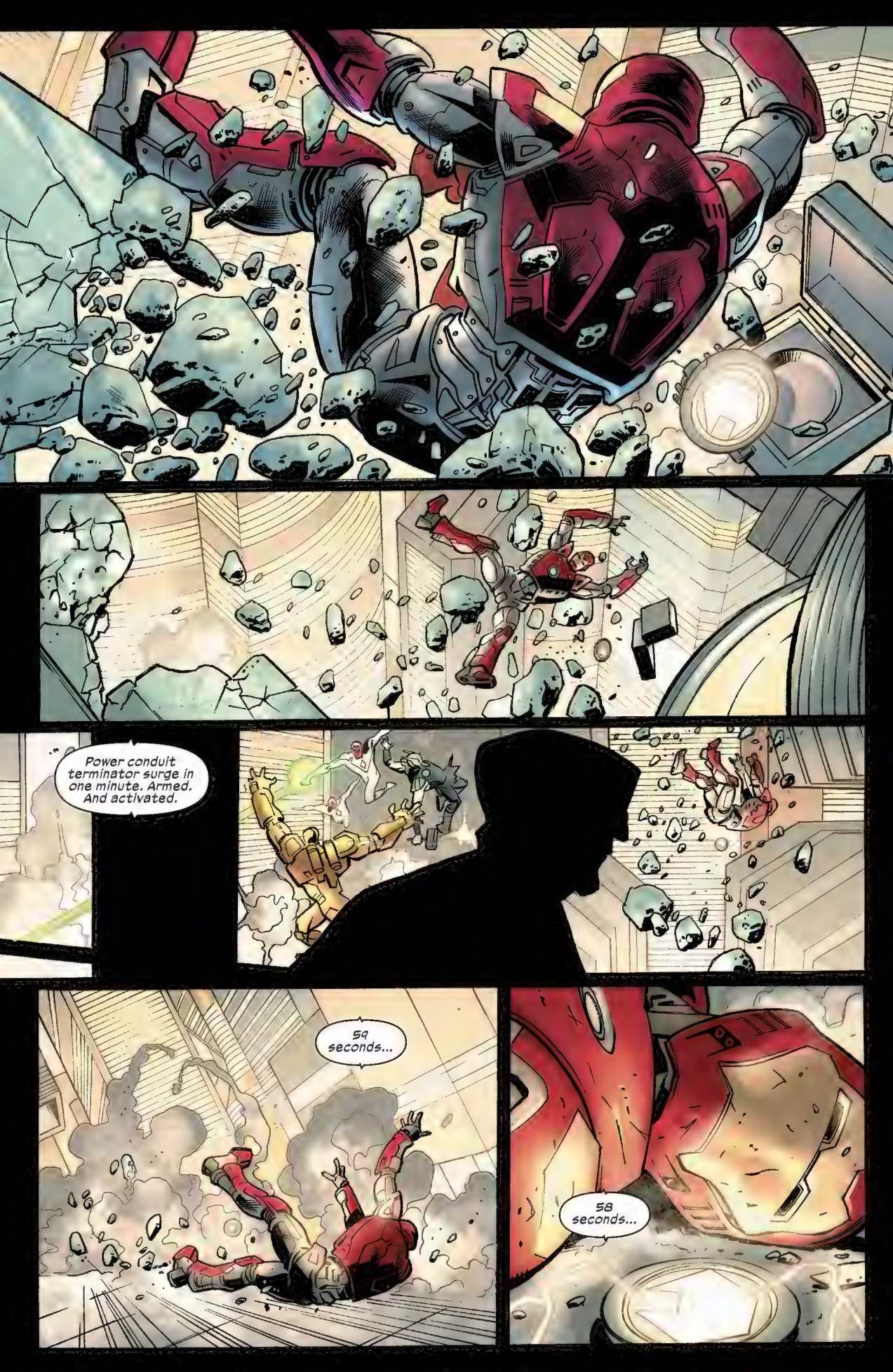
I can see those wheels spinning, Mr. Stark.
You've decided to play your own game, haven't you?
This isn't a game! You need to be stopped!
Stopped?
I'm just getting started. And you? You're just an ignorant, ungrateful child, rejecting your environment...
Like the world you exist in just happened.
"Well, it didn't just happen...
"I happened.
"And these people are here to erase all my mighty works.
"Including you.
"So you can run and hide, or you can fight inevitability...
"The choice is yours, Stark, though it matters very, very little.

As brilliant as you are, you couldn't be more wrong...
I have a third choice.
And I'm gonna take it.

Stop him! Stop-- HURKK!
Pawns! Pointless creatures! I understand why you do what you do. What else could anyone expect from something designed at creation to die.
But you are delaying what has to happen.
Stop all this obstruction-- serve your real purpose...
...AND BRING ME KANG!

There!
There he is!
I have waited two lives for this moment!
And now that moment is here!

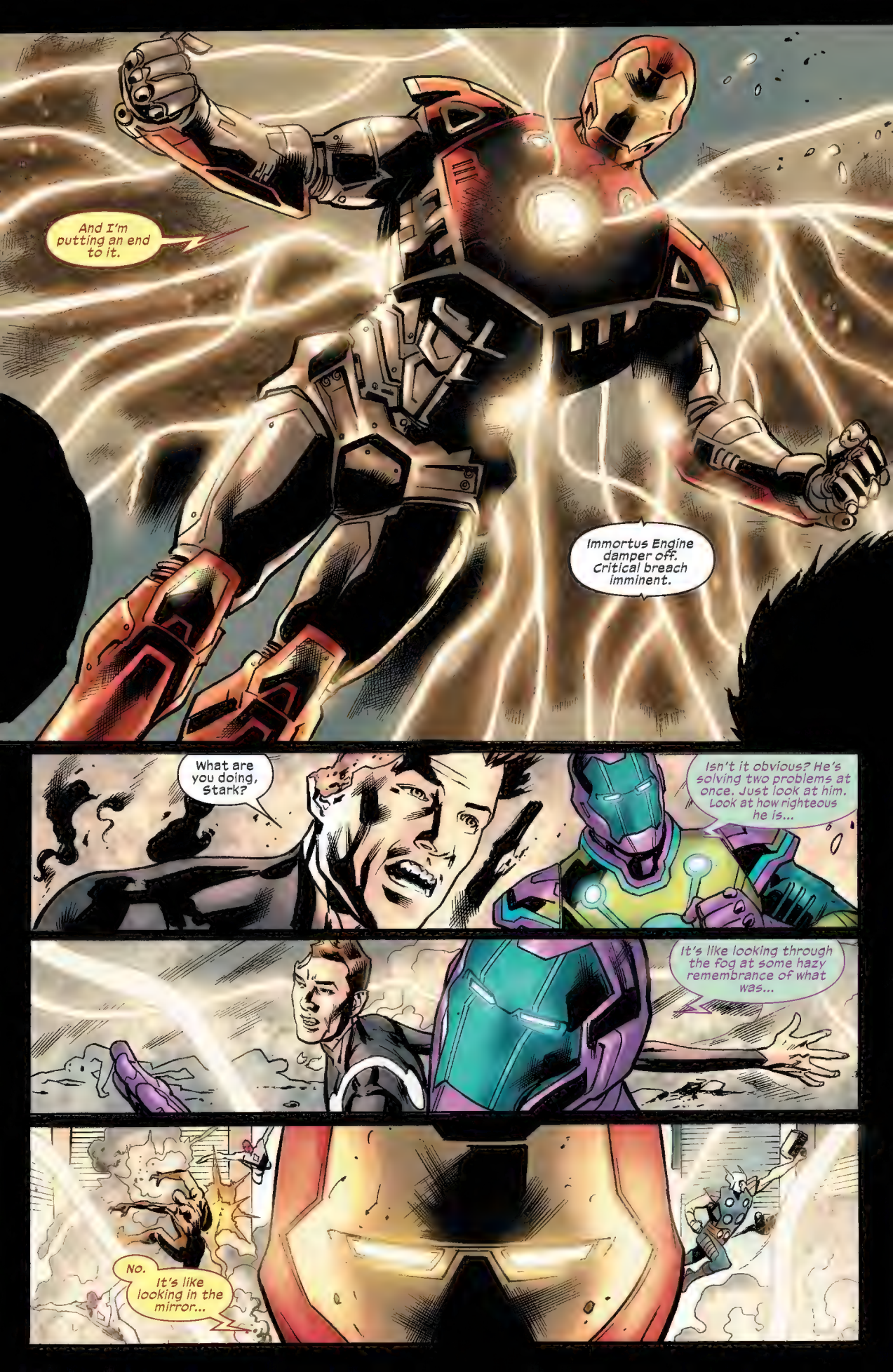
All right. Everyone's locked in and engaged in their quiet war...
All I have to do now is--
AARRGGHHH!
UHHUFFF!


Power conduit terminator surge in one minute. Armed. And activated.
59 seconds...
58 seconds...

"57 seconds..."
Thank you... thank you for that...
Pain clarifies... and suddenly, I remember...
I remember...
I remember you.

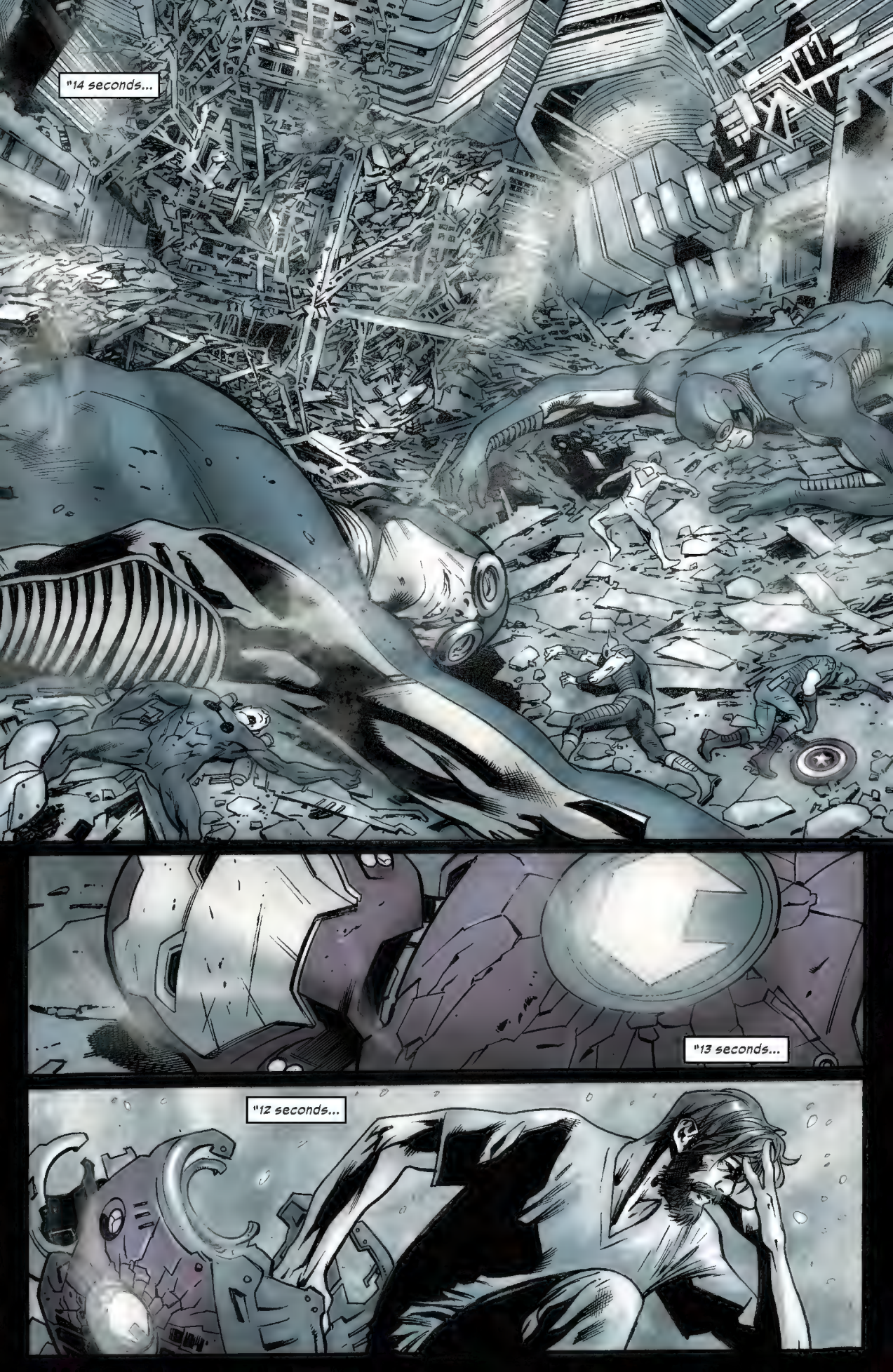
The Far Future.
Then.
I had to know.
Hmmmm?
I have built my kingdom. I have remade my world. And I had to know if it would endure...
This is as far as I could come--where the future ends...
Where am I? When am I?
You are here. NOW. As you were always going to be.
You are the Maker, and I've been waiting for you.
For revenge?
For reverence?
Who am I to you?
You are my maker...

...and what you now witness is my origin.
I remember...
I know *who* you are.
So do I.


And I'm putting an end to it.
Immortus Engine damper off. Critical breach imminent.
What are you doing, Stark?
Isn't it obvious? He's solving two problems at once. Just look at him. Look at how righteous he is...
It's like looking through the fog at some hazy remembrance of what was...
No.
It's like looking in the mirror...

...and hating what you see.

The Maker's Castle. Latveria.
I promised...
So why do I hesitate?
Is it because I have to consider this might be another prison for me?
One where the walls are made of obligation and not punishment.
And all-consuming in a way that my previous cell never could be.
Something broken...for someone broken...
Who can say?
The choice I leave to better angels.
"15 seconds...


"14 seconds...
"13 seconds...
"12 seconds...

"5 seconds...
"4 seconds...
"3 seconds...
"2 seconds...
"1 second..."

One week later.
Just look at it.
Like some kind of outrageous *ticking bomb.*
It's a fitting legacy for our dear, disappeared leader, no? Some elaborate game that ends with all of us dead.
What do we know *exactly?*
Not enough.

The dome--the City itself--is closed off. We've seen this before.
Merde ça vient d'arriver.
Yes. It did just happen.
But never for this long, right?
No one knew what he was doing when it originally appeared, but the story he told--be it true or not--is that the first time was for a month while inside a thousand years passed by.
So. This... this is something far more foreboding.
Yes, I'd say that 24 months is cause for dread.
I asked him once--it was autumn, and I remember the smell of burning leaves in the air--was time dilation in the dome a constant?
If one month equaled a thousand years, would three months equal three thousand years?
What did he say?

He just smiled, and said...
Some secrets are mine and mine alone.
So we have two years until the Dome reopens?
Two years to hold this together.
Or two years to tear it apart.
Or we could just drink and defile ourselves. Whatever is required.
C'est la vie.
This is a time for serious people.
You could-- at the very least-- pretend to be one.

And you shouldn't pretend like it's not a valid choice.
After all, there's no guarantee that whatever comes out of that thing when it opens remotely resembles you or me.
Or shares our hopes and desires.
Or thinks of us as equal--as human--at all.
Well, this is clearly a subject that requires a bit more thought. Perhaps we should tackle a more short-term problem:
What do we do about America and their Union?

First Stane, now Stark...
One of our seven sovereign bodies has no head.
Appoint someone new?
Find the right man for the job?
Or...
...we could split it up.
Well now. That would require a firm hand.
Wouldn't it?
Yes...

I suppose it would.
Shall we vote?

Stark Tower.
He gave this to you?
The world was ending, Anthony. The future colliding with the now.
Temporal kings were being overthrown, and multiversal evils were being undone...
But bringing these things to you was my most important task.
This machine-- the broken Immortus Engine, which you and I have already repaired--the secret files you showed me, and this...
A letter from my father.

While I have some notion of what *could* be done with these things--*the potential of them...*
...he said you would know what *should* be done.
And so the choice should be yours.
...
Is my father dead?
Variables, probabilities, the very character of the man fighting for his life...
I'm sorry, but I have no way to definitively answer that question.
I'm gonna need a suit.

It'll need to handle temporal shear and need some kind of integrated navigational control.
And a *weapon*...it should also be a *weapon*.
Yeah.
Without a doubt.

Okay.
That should do it...
Let's get to work. Are you ready?
Of course.
All we need is a place to start.
Well, based on the Maker's files, there were things he missed--things he couldn't find. I think I have a pretty good idea why.
And what are you going to call yourself?
Iron Man? After your father?
No. He's Iron Man.

For now, I'll just be Iron Lad.
At least until I've earned a better name.

EPILOGUE: "WIN"

The past.
My dearest Anthony,
I am so tired of this world.
I am so tired of the people in it.
Of what they accept...
And of what they have become.
But I know the fault was mine. Maybe more than most because of my gifts and the means that came with them.
I was so wrapped up in the good things I was doing--the work and the bounty that work provided us--that I didn't care enough to notice what was really going on in the world I was shaping.

I know now that it is a false, fallen world that we paint as "good enough," but under its skin, we all know it is rotten to the core.
And on reflection, almost all of the things I have made do nothing but support the systems that reduce men and women to pawns and playthings...to workers and consumers...to servants and slaves.
All the things I have made are tainted with a patina of evil.
All of them but one.
And that is you.
If this has found its way to you, then I am gone and I have left you a world that is no place for the innocent.
But only innocent eyes can see it for what it could be.
Remember, Anthony...
It's never too late to change the world around you...

You just have to fight.
And you have to win.
THE BEGINNING...

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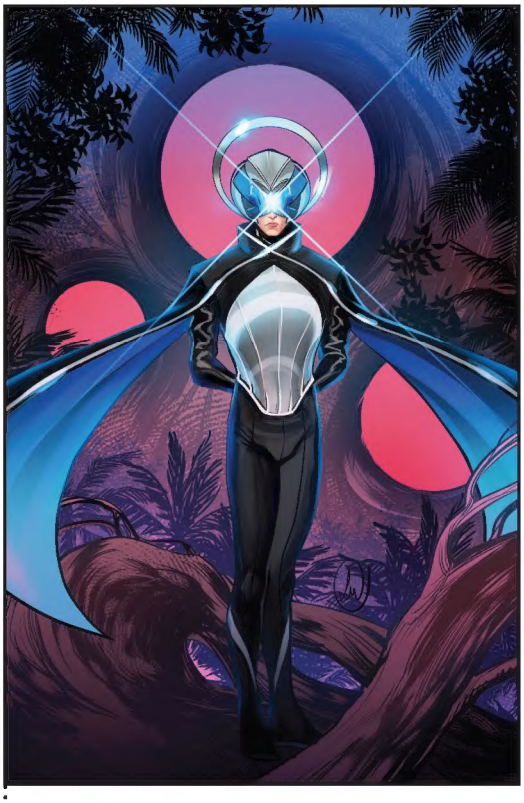

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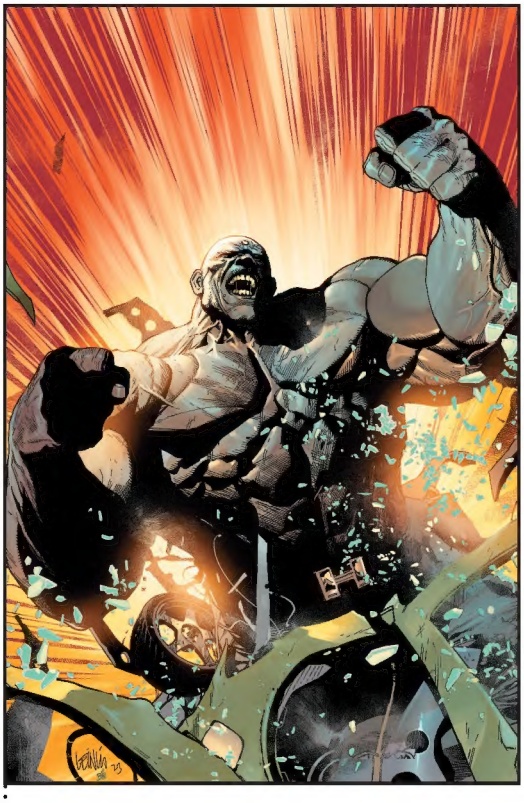

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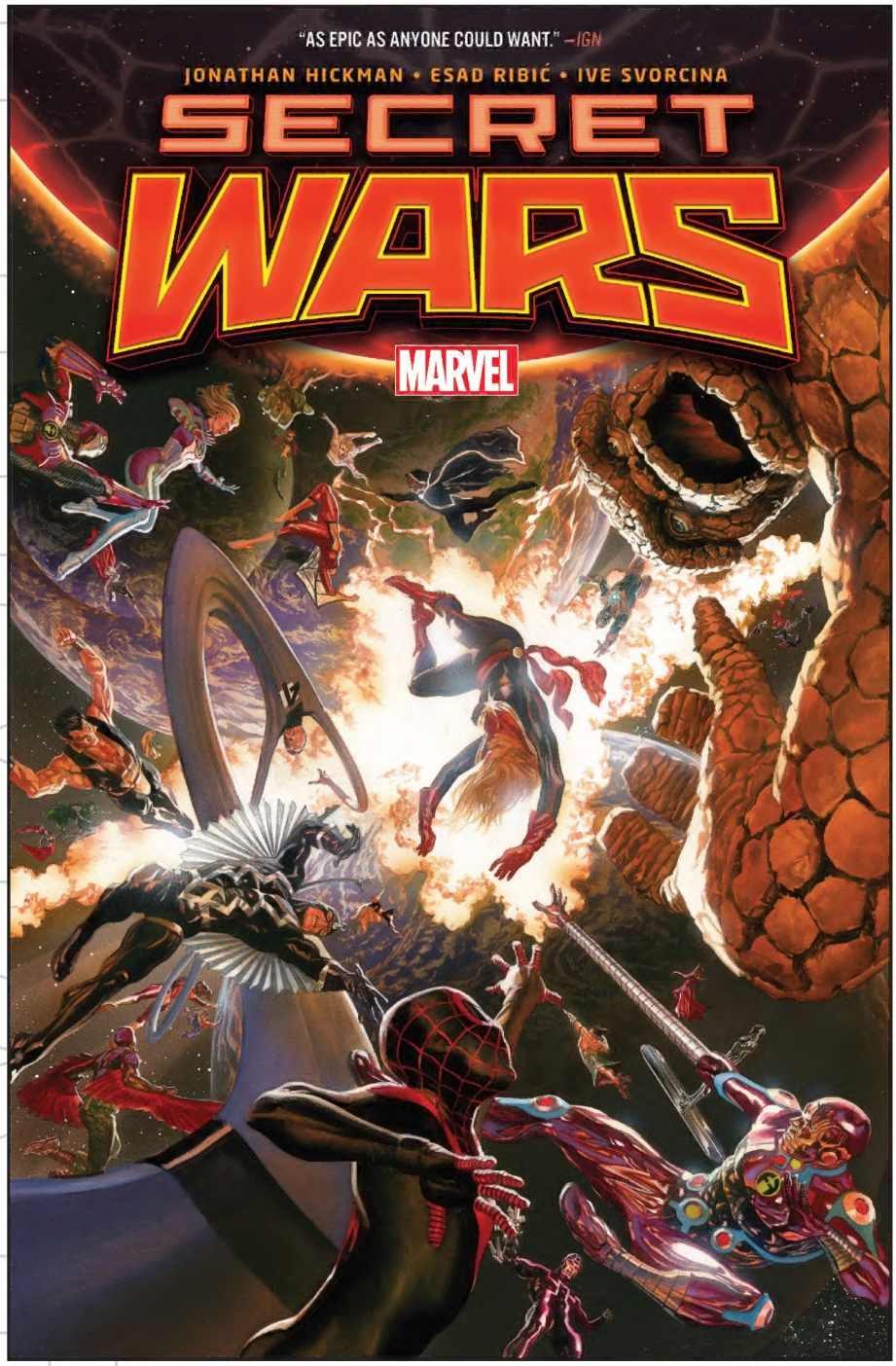

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